

**Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.**

The Gravity of Weight

College Weight Gain: Debunking the Myth of the 'Freshman 15'

How much weight do college students really gain in their freshman year?

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There are many presumptions—"beliefs that persist in the absence of supporting scientific evidence"—and even myths—"beliefs that persist despite contradicting evidence"—about weight control. Seven of these myths, including about setting realistic goals for weight loss, the rapidity of weight loss, weight loss readiness, and breast feeding, were recently debunked in a comprehensive review by David B. Allison, PhD and his colleagues that was published this past year in the *New England Journal of*

Medicine.

What about the so-called "Freshman 15"? This is the season when students return to school and many thousands are leaving home to begin their freshman year at college. Do these newly matriculating students really gain fifteen pounds when they go off to college? The answer, despite articles in the popular media to the contrary, is no. Studies to date have shown that freshman college students do tend to gain weight but far less than the reported fifteen pounds for most freshmen—and over time, may even tend to lose much of any weight they gain.

Freshman weight gain was apparently first noted in the literature in the mid-1980s in an article by

The so-called "Freshman 15"

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Hovell and colleagues. These researchers compared women living on campus with a comparable sample

of freshman women living in the community. They found those freshman living on campus were almost three times as likely as the community sample to gain weight but by their junior year they were almost back at baseline levels. Reasons for the initial weight gain during freshman year were attributed to cafeteria food and dormitory living, as well as to the psychological stress of living away from home, family, and friends. The subsequent weight loss over the next few years of college was attributed to a move from the dorms and away from cafeteria-style eating. According to Cecelia Brown, in a review article published in 2008, the term “Freshman 15” was coined and first appeared in a 1989 article in the magazine *Seventeen*. For the years 1985 through 2006, Brown surveyed peer-reviewed journals, magazines, and newspapers, including university newspapers, and found considerable “misinformation” in the media articles that did not reflect research findings: half of the *popular press publications* claimed a 15-pound weight gain while the 14 research studies in the peer-reviewed journals indicated a typical weight gain was less than five pounds. Brown’s conclusion was that the “Freshman 15” was “one of college and university students’ most dreaded fears” and nothing other than an “urban myth.” Furthermore, she noted that freshman students’ preoccupation with gaining so much weight might even lead to eating disorders such as *bulimia* and *anorexia nervosa*, whose incidences peak during these late adolescent years.

More recently, researchers Smith-Jackson and Reel, in a 2012 article surveyed over 200 freshman women, all of whom had heard of the dreaded “Freshman 15,” and who reported “intense fears about gaining weight.” Many perceived weight gain as “inevitable” and even “a self-fulfilling prophesy.” Vending machines,



University life is conducive to weight gain.

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availability of fast food (and limited healthy choices), increased alcohol use, buffet-style cafeterias, and “food independence” (i.e. “increased choice over one’s food intake and preparation”) were all cited as potential factors that can lead to initial weight gain in freshman year transition. Communal eating (temptation to eat more when in a group) and less physical exercise have also been noted in the literature as contributors to this tendency to gain weight.

Research published in 2013 by Dr. Brian Wansink and his group at the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University,

Ithaca, found that Cornell students tended to eat more unhealthy snacks (e.g. potato chips, fries, chicken fingers) rather than healthy snacks (e.g. yoghurt, fresh fruit, and granola bars) in the final two weeks of the fall semester around the time of final exams and term paper deadlines. The researchers recommended that health professionals and those who advise students caution them about this possibility, and they also suggested that the food service provide more healthy convenient alternatives for the students.

Bottom line: Potential weight gain is understandably a realistic concern for freshmen college students, often more for women than men, as they make the transition from home to school. An unrealistic fear of the “Freshman 15” myth, however, may exacerbate anxiety and even lead to eating disorders in particularly vulnerable students with body image preoccupations. Students



This photo is also part of the cover of my book, *The Gravity of Weight* (2010, American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.)

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should be aware of changes in their eating habits, even fairly minor ones, that may lead to weight gain. Accountability, i.e., monitoring one's behavior, whether by having a diet buddy friend or weighing oneself on a regular basis, may help avoid creeping and excessive weight gain.

About the Author



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In Print: *The Gravity of Weight: A Clinical Guide to Weight Loss and Maintenance*

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