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The Social Factors of College Lifestyle that may Cause Weight Gain in Undergraduate Students

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INTRODUCTION

The college life is a one of a kind experience. It is usually the first time students move away from their families and become independent. It is also a time for experimentation. Many students begin to figure out who they are by getting involved in school activities, and meeting new people. It is important to make friends and meet new people in college, and for many this is done by partying at night. College is a time of change: many begin to pick up habits, such as drinking, to deal with the change. This time of change includes social problems as well as academic, problems, which can be very stressful and tough for students to manage. As a result of these changes; body weight, dietary habits and overall fitness start to change, in many cases spiraling downward.

Studies have been done focusing on college students and weight gain. In this paper I focus on the social factors of college lifestyle correlated with weight gain in college students. Weight gain is caused by poor eating choices and exercising habits, heavy drinking of alcohol and increased stress levels. It is important to study the causes of weight gain in this particular group because they contribute to the tremendous rise of obesity in the United States (CDC, 2007). Another reason this is sociologically important is because the culture of college is one like no other. College is a time of learning, growth and development. Students engage in activities that they perhaps would not have participated in before or after college. These habits that students create during the years of college may stay with them in the future. These habits tend to be created during freshman year.

THE FRESHMAN 15

The “Freshman 15” is a phenomenon that most college students are aware of. It is a result of the drastic change from high school to college. “College enrollment has been documented as a time for rapid weight gain” (Nelson et al., 2009, pg 227). The “Freshman 15” suggests those freshmen who have difficulty adjusting to the change will gain a significant amount of weight during their first year. Studies have been done to explore this phenomena and whether it is true. In these studies, Body Mass Index (BMI) was measured on numerous occasions over time to assess whether weight gain has occurred. The majority of these studies showed that BMI increased due to the increase of fat, not muscle (Kasperek et al., 2008).

Three studies conducted showed results that mean weight gain was about seven pounds (Hoffman et al, 2006; Kasperek et al., 2008; Mihalopoulos, Auinger and Klein, 2008). Another study found that the mean weight gain during the first year of college was nine pounds (Racette et al., 2005). Within all four studies, 50% or greater of the sample had gained some amount of weight (Hoffman et al, 2006; Kasperek et al., 2008; Mihalopoulos, Auinger and Klein, 2008; Racette et al., 2005). The other percentages of each sample either stayed the same or lost weight. Although these studies did show weight gain, a gain of 15 pounds was not proven.

Factors that relate to the weight gain include poor dietary choices, poor exercising habits, increased partying and socialization at nights, poor time management and overall increased amount of stress from school work. In high school, students had more leisure time compared to college and may have participated in organized sports. However, in

college it is more difficult to participate in an organized sport because of the level of skill and time needed (Hoffman et al., 2006). While maybe students had poor eating habits in high school, they also had exercised more compared to college where poor eating habits would not be balanced by exercising.

EATING HABITS

Poor dietary choices and eating habits can cause college weight gain. It has been found that students no longer meet the required servings of fruit and vegetables on the food pyramid (DeBate, Topping and Sargent, 2001). The main source of food for students living on college campuses is dining halls. Most university dining halls provide a buffet style food system that provides a wide variety of food and allows students to eat anything they want (Peterson et al. 2010) without any restrictions on amount. The wide variety of food available ranges from healthy food, such as fruits and vegetables, to high fatty and starchy foods, such as desserts, pizza and French fries. In one study, students stated they went into dining halls knowing what to eat, but as soon as they saw the food available, many times their minds changed (Nelson et al. 2009). Because of the wide choice of foods in dining halls, students tend to feel intimidated and not sure of their original food selections. The style of dining halls also encourages eaters to get a second serving of food which can lead to over consumption. Students also stated not being aware of nutrition labels on foods that could help them decipher what food is a healthier selection (Peterson et al., 2010). Whether the nutritional facts were available and not seen or not at all posted was not stated.

Poor food choices are also made outside of dining halls. Due to time lack of time and poor time management, students tend to eat readily made food while on the go (Nelson et

al., 2009). Students reported buying more unhealthful food due to more affordable prices compared to healthful foods. They bought these foods not only in stores or vending machines, but in local restaurants and shops that provide deals for college students (Nelson et al. 2009). Many times, places with affordable food for students are fast-food restaurants which provide high fatty foods at a cheap price. One study found that between male and female college students, females were more like to consume high fatty or fried foods (Racette et al. 2005). High fatty and fried foods are good in moderation; however, they tend to be abused, which can cause a significant difference in body image and weight.

Another popular place to eat food for students is their own dorm room. Not many students have access to a kitchen, but many do have access to a microwave. Students tend to eat Ramen noodles or cup a soup, which are high fat and high sodium foods (Nelson et al. 2009). These poor dietary habits and excessive eating habits are related to the amounts of stress college provides.

STRESS

The main purposes of college are to further education and prepare individuals to seek a job after graduation. Compared to high school, college includes large amounts of school work. This includes spending more time on school work outside of classes. Stress may arise from making necessary changes to lifestyle while managing the challenges of course loads (Wichianson et al., 2009). These changes include the increased time spent on school work and balancing commitments all at once. Time management seems to be an issue for many students. This is because students tend to juggle classes, extracurricular activities, and a job into one day which can be very hectic. Health demands tend to become a lower priority when compared to commitments, such as schoolwork, employment and

social obligations (Nelson et al., 2009). In one study, researchers found that night time eating is used as a coping strategy of stress for undergraduates (Wichianson et al. 2009). Students in another study stated they tend to eat more and exercise less while feeling “stressed out” (Nelson et al. 2009).

EXERCISING HABITS

Many students tend not to exercise during times of stress and increased course work, and they tend to forget that exercising can help relieve stress and re-energize your body. In the studies conducted, men were more associated with strength training and weights, while women engaged in lower intensity activities (Kasperek et al. 2008). Excess weight can cause females to feel more self-conscious than males and because of this; it may be difficult for females to feel confident to work out in front of others. Something that the study did not state was what kind of low intensity activities females participated in; this would have been beneficial to the readers and students.

In another study, one female stated how she was not aware of how to use a specific machine and asked a friend for help. A nearby male looked at her and laughed which discouraged her (Nelson et al. 2009). Colleges provide athletic equipment and aerobic classes for students to use. If schools do not provide instructional classes for students on how to use machines, it can be difficult for beginners to learn. Another complaint about recreation centers is how they tend to be overly crowded and students need to wait in line to use a cardio machine.

ALCOHOL AND DRINKING HABITS

One of the most popular social activities for college students is partying. For most students, parties where they can be with friends and have fun are the highlight of their weekend. Ask any college student and they will tell you that nearly all parties involve drinking alcohol. For many students their available time is Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, which is when students engage in drinking as a way to unwind, relax and forget about the stressful day or week of school. Alcohol tends to be high in calories and many students are aware of this.

Lloyd et al. (2008), conducted research on college students and labeled drinkers into low, moderate and high risk drinkers. Males tended to represent the population of moderate and high risk drinkers. Moderate risk drinking was defined as consuming an average of four to five drinks per episode on an average of one to three days a week. The results showed that moderate risk drinkers were more likely to eat food before drinking and after drinking with the “drunk munchies.” It was also stated that late night eating was more prevalent after episodes of drinking compared to nights of non-drinking (Lloyd et al. 2008). When students have the “drunk munchies” they tend to eat unhealthful foods. This is because of the availability of these foods at local stores and shops that are open late (Nelson et al., 2009).

Other studies showed that students tended to eat more before drinking to be able to consume more alcohol throughout the night (Nelson et al., 2009). However studies have also shown that some students ate less or skipped meals in general prior to episodes of drinking to consume less calories. This also helped students get drunk faster which limited the calories from drinking as well (Peralta, 2002). For students this way may be helpful to

keep the weight off while enjoying social life, but down the road could lead to other serious poor eating habits, such as eating disorders.

CONCLUSION

For many college students, body image and weight are important. The “Freshman 15” is a common phenomenon most college students worry about, however through studies has been proven false. Poor dietary habits are the most influential factor to weight gain. All-you-can-eat dining halls and late night eating influence these eating habits in bad ways because of the types of food available to students. College life also tends to be time consuming and poor time management skills lead to eating unhealthy foods while on the go. Stress is another big influence to weight gain. School tends to be stressful, with heavy amounts of work and lots of deadlines. Students also try and balance school with a job and friends which can be difficult for many. In times of stress, students tend to overeat and choose unhealthy foods. Exercising tends to be at the bottom of the list, and leisure time tends to be minimal. Students usually engage in drinking to help them forget about school. Due to the high amount of calories in alcohol, drinking excessive amounts can lead to weight gain.

Research is constantly being done about obesity and weight problems. For future research about college students, researchers should try to include a wider variety of mixed ethnicities, rather than sampling mostly Caucasians. Researchers should try to have an equal balance in their studies because eating habits can be different between each ethnicity. For example the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that African Americans have the highest rates of obesity in the US (CDC, 2007). Although no

studies in this paper have looked at particular ethnicities, it is important to know how ethnicities vary.

Another recommendation for future research would be for a longitudinal study from freshman year to the year after college. Researchers should measure students after each year for four to five years and note the differences between each year of college and the one after graduation. The results of this could show us which year tends to be the most prone to weight gain out of all years. It is important that we research and learn the habits of college students to understand and teach how we can help prevent higher rates of obesity in our country.

This paper is a reminder to students of what social factors can affect one's figure and what precautions should be taken when engaging in certain unhealthy habits. While some of these factors are found in all adults' lives, the unique combination of all of these factors in college means that the health of college students may be particularly at risk.

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