The Freshman 15 – Will it/Did it Happen to Me?

The “Freshman 15” refers to the stereotypical fifteen pounds that college freshman gain as they break away from mom’s cooking and are (generally) allowed to eat whatever they want, whenever they want. What freshman doesn’t get at least a little excited about the ability to make unlimited trips to the bakery counter for dessert? Or the availability of burgers for every lunch and dinner? Or the autonomy to order pizza in the wee hours of the morning?

But is the “Freshman 15” real? A review of the scientific literature will show you that while it is indeed common for freshman to gain weight during the first year at college, the “fifteen” part of the “Freshman 15”, is somewhat of an exaggeration. Different studies yielded different results (ranging from weight loss of 2 pounds up to gaining 28 pounds), but meta-analyses (statistical research that combines the results of many similar studies) show that the average weight gain is likely 4-6 pounds. It’s interesting to note that one study revealed that freshman coming from lower income households were more likely to gain weight at the beginning of college; and weight gain was more likely to be seen in whites and Hispanics rather than African Americans. Also interesting, is the fact that it’s typical to gain weight between the ages of 18 and 22 anyway, regardless of starting college, and actually, the literature shows that those that attend college gain less weight than their non-college-attending peers.

So, is there reason to be concerned about the potential to gain 4-6 pounds? Probably so; here’s why:

- Quite often, the poor habits that lead some freshman to gain the “typical” 4-6 pounds continue through the rest of their college years. While a five pound weight gain during freshman year isn’t necessarily going to put you on your obesity-related death bed, the habits that contributed to that modest weight gain could cause serious health consequences down the line.
- Any weight you gain, you’ll probably want to lose later. Losing weight typically involves work. Avoiding the weight gain in the first place equals less work later.
- Weight gain in college could be a sign that you haven’t developed the coping skills necessary to handle the stress of college life. Students often turn to food for comfort, when feeling homesick and/or dealing with all the changes, stress, and personal challenges that often occur with the college experience – new friends, academic pressures, concerns about money, availability of alcohol, etc. Sometimes students use food to exert control, especially when they feel they have little control in other aspects of their lives.

Is there anything you can do about it? Of course! Read on.

- BE MIINDFUL: Attempt to eat when only you are truly hungry, and stop when you are satisfied (but not stuffed). Before you sit down to eat, ask yourself “Am I really hungry right now?” Some students eat just to be social; because the group
they are with is eating. Some students turn to food to when they are bored, anxious, stressed, etc. Pay attention to your feelings of true hunger, regardless of what others are eating around you. If you find yourself turning to food as a result of anxiety or stress, consider looking to UTSA’s Counseling Services for help (http://www.utsa.edu/counsel/).

- BEWARE OF SUGARY BEVERAGE CALORIES: Unlimited access to soda/drink machines can lead to unwanted weight gain because most students don’t realize how many calories they are consuming – a large soda from a fast food restaurant can have 310 calories (same as a small order of waffle fries from Chick Fil A!). And it’s not just soda – lemonade, sweet tea, sweetened coffee beverages and even fruit juices can be offenders too. The body responds differently to liquid calories than to calories that you chew. The hormones that are typically released at the conclusion of a big meal to tell you that you are “full”, aren’t as responsive to liquid calories. So basically, you don’t get the same “I’m full” message while drinking your calories. Switch to water – it’s cheap, healthy, and a good thirst quencher. If it’s the caffeine you’re after, diet soda, black coffee, and unsweet tea can do the trick. And if you need some flavor, drink diet soda, sugar-free drinks (like Crystal Light), and for coffee and tea, use a little calorie-free sweetener (Equal, Splenda, Sweet-n-Low, Stevia) and some milk.

- GET MOVING! Although the life of a college student can be busy, carve out some time for exercise each week. Exercise burns calories, can help you sleep (which research tells us is important in weight control), and can help manage stress levels (which also can contribute to poor eating habits). UTSA Campus Rec offers so many fun ways to get active. In addition to the fantastic exercise facility complete with a rock wall, access to low-cost personal trainers and a variety of group exercise classes, you can have fun being active outdoors with an Outdoor Pursuits trip, or have some friendly competition with Intramural Sports.

- START AND END WITH FRUITS & VEGGIES: Start out each meal with a fruit or vegetable – the fiber will help fill you up. If you feel hungry and are tempted to go back for seconds, indulge in second helpings of fruits and vegetables, rather than starches and fats. It’s difficult to gain weight if you are consistently filling yourself with fruits and vegetables!

- BE PREPARED: Late night studying and stress can lead to binge eating – so make sure to have healthy snacks available. It’s a good idea to combine protein and carbs to give you a steady stream of fuel – think: apples with peanut butter, grapes with string cheese, celery with hummus, whole grain cereal with milk or low fat Greek yogurt.

- WATCH IT AT THE CAFE: It can be tempting to have a little taste of everything that is offered at the Roadrunner Café. But be wise. Pay attention to your hunger level. The salad bar can be a good option, but don’t overdo it with bacon bits, cheese, croutons, and regular salad dressings (try “light” ones). Try to stick to fruit for dessert. Strive to choose lean proteins (white meat poultry, “loin” or “round” cuts of beef and pork, fish, eggs, and 1% milk.) Look for foods that are baked, grilled, roasted, or steamed rather than foods that are labeled “crispy” (usually fried), buttered, in a “cream sauce”, or covered in cheese.
For more tips to prevent the Freshman 15 (or help with getting rid of it) or any other nutrition-related matter, be sure to set up a nutrition assessment with Campus Recreation’s registered dietitian nutritionist, Annie Bell. Appointments are individualized to address your needs, questions, and concerns and last about an hour – oh, and they’re free! Full instructions on how to register for your appointment are here: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/nutritionregistration

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4272668/