

Back to school: Is higher education making you fat?

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A new study published today in the journal *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism (APNM)* looks beyond the much-feared weight gain common to first-year students and reports on the full 4-year impact of higher education on weight, BMI, and body composition.

"Gropper et al. present a unique study that follows students through their undergraduate years. It documents the nature of the weight gain and shows the differences between [males and females](#)," says Susan Whiting, a professor of nutrition and dietetics at the University of Saskatchewan.

"While dozens of studies have investigated weight gain during the freshman year of college and have reported on the so called "[freshman 15](#)" (the commonly held belief that students gain an average of 15 lbs their first year of college), our study is the first to examine changes in weight, [body mass index](#), [body composition](#), and [body shape](#) over the 4-year college period," explains Sareen Gropper, a co-author of the study and researcher at Auburn University in Alabama.

The study followed 131 college students from the beginning of their first year to the end of their senior year. After 4 years in college about 70% of students had gained weight, which averaged at 5.3 kg, or 11.68 lbs; males gained significantly more weight, percent body fat, and BMI than females; and the percentage of participants considered overweight or obese increased from 18% to 31%.

"College and university students are often living away from home; they

do not have a parent grocery shopping or preparing food for them. They can be distracted from their health by their studies and by extracurricular activities," says Terry Graham, Editor of *APNM*, and a professor in the Department of Human Health and Nutritional Sciences at the University of Guelph. "While one can alter their body composition at anytime by tipping the balance of [energy intake](#) and expenditure, this investigation demonstrates how important the years of [early adulthood](#) can be in this aspect. After 4 years the changes are quite substantial even though the daily, weekly, and even monthly responses are subtle. This study highlights that students need to make healthy choices and also that the institutions need to take steps to facilitate these decisions."

Gropper agrees, "Our findings clearly suggest the need for additional campus-based health promotion strategies for students from the freshman year through their senior year of college."

More information: The paper "Changes in body weight, composition, and shape: a 4-year study of college students", published in the journal *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, is available Open Access at www.nrcresearchpress.com/doi/full/10.1139/h2012-139

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