

US college students eat their vegetables. Really?!

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This image shows American University students exercising at Jacobs/Cassell Fitness Center. Credit: Jeff Watts/American University

U.S. college students do better than their counterparts in the United Kingdom when it comes to physical activity, a healthy diet and less smoking, according to new research published in the latest issue of the journal *Education and Health*.

"Among U.S. students, we see greater consumption of fruits and vegetables, more participation in organized sports, and less smoking," said American University Prof. Stacey Snelling, a lead study author. "Participation in organized sports and exercise could reflect the more formal focus on physical activity at the college level that we have in the U.S. The study shows that certain policies and laws in the U.S. are

making an impact, particularly with regard to smoke-free campuses."

More than twice as many [college students](#) in the U.K. identified as smokers—39 percent compared with 16 percent in the U.S. Tobacco- and smoke-free campuses are a growing trend in the U.S. There are 1,478 smoke-free campuses, according to the group American Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation. Of these, 976 are 100 percent tobacco-free, and 292 prohibit the use of e-cigarettes anywhere on campus.

Snelling and her colleagues examined data from a sample of self-reported [health](#) behaviors of university students in the U.S. and U.K. Data came from the American College Health Association, which collects survey information on student health behaviors, such as tobacco use, weight, nutrition and exercise, campus safety, and mental and physical health. Data was gathered in the U.K., using a survey with slight word changes in British English. Survey respondents were 23 or younger and mostly women. Snelling's colleagues included health economics Prof. Heather Gage and Peter Williams, a statistics consultant, of the University of Surrey, England.

Health education on campus

The health of college students is a growing concern in both countries. Increasing numbers of American students are reporting psychological problems to student counseling services. In the U.K., 29 percent of students have psychological distress that meets standards for clinical diagnosis.

An important takeaway from the study for both countries, Snelling said, is how to improve [health education](#) and wellness on college campuses.

"Health education programs on college campuses need to catch the attention of young folks. In the U.S. we have creative ways of reaching

students through social marketing and peer-to-peer education, among other methods," Snelling said. "But the study results raise the question of where we can improve, also in the U.S., on how colleges and universities can have more coordinated programming to address the whole student."

Regarding fruit and vegetable consumption, college dorm policies in the U.S. are having an impact, the study found. Residence hall policies encourage nutritionally balanced meals, healthy eating and meal plans, for example. In contrast, students in England are more likely to prepare their own food, making eating healthy less convenient or more costly. U.K. students ate 1.5 fruits or vegetables per day compared with U.S. students who ate 3.5, the study found.

Both groups of students reported undertaking a breast self-exam at the same rate, but preventive care appointments, such as gynecological and dental, were greater for U.S. students.

Alcohol consumption and weight concerns

The sampling revealed similar findings for the numbers of students who consume alcohol and those with concerns about weight. More than half of students in both countries said they had exercised to lose weight in the last 30 days.

"Alcohol consumption remains a challenge for colleges and universities in both countries and continues to need addressing," Snelling said. "The focus on weight is a reminder of the challenge in educating students that health is about fitness and nutrition and less about a number on a scale."

In both countries, more students are entering higher education, with participation rates approaching 50 percent. Many students face financial pressures and concerns about succeeding in a competitive global job market. Struggle to follow health-enhancing behaviors affect the risk of

chronic conditions in adulthood, as college is often the time in life where habits form that will continue through a lifespan.

"U.S. students in general reported better health, healthier lifestyles and more access to preventive services. This could reflect a difference in how the two countries approach health care," Snelling said. "Regardless, academic achievement and health are highly related and healthier individuals are better learners. Universities need to work to create a culture that supports intellectual growth and promotes health."

Provided by American University

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