

Nine things to keep in mind when preparing for freshman year

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Kennedy Lawrence felt ready for her freshman year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She was excited about moving on from high school,

eager to taste freedom and "thought that it was just going to be like the best thing ever."

The Omaha resident wasn't giving much thought to her health. But about two weeks after moving in, she came down with a bug. "And then, honestly, I wasn't super-prepared to be able to be sick on my own," she said.

Being sick on and off throughout the year with various flu-like illnesses that passed through her dorm was completely different from being sick at home. Caring for herself meant getting meals, doing laundry and showing up at class even when she felt lousy. She also had to figure out how to navigate the campus health system, which cold medicine to buy and where to buy it.

"It was an adjustment at first, definitely," said Lawrence, now a junior who wrote about first-year health struggles for the campus news publication.

Dr. Meredith Hayden, chief medical officer in the department of [student health and wellness](#) at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, said it's normal for incoming students to push health issues aside. "They're focused on things like, "Who's going to be my roommate? And what are we coordinating for our bedding?"

But the first year is "a very pivotal moment" for health, said Dr. Brian Shackelford, a staff physician in the student health center at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro. "For the first time in a student's life, they're actually the captain of their health care."

To help with that transition, here are nine things to keep in mind.

1. Don't wait until you're sick to think about being sick

Before Hayden's daughter, now a junior, headed off to college, the two worked together on knowing her campus health care options. That meant reading the website, making sure her daughter entered contact info into her phone and asking questions such as, "If you're sick, what number are you going to call? Where is the clinic located? How are you going to get there? What will you do if you need help after hours?"

Hayden also recommends scouting out campus health care professionals and making an appointment for a physical or a get-acquainted visit as a way for a student to learn to navigate the system before a crisis.

Someone with pre-existing conditions should make sure their [medical records](#) are transferred ahead of time, said Shackelford, who's also medical director of N.C. A&T's physician assistant studies program.

2. Stock up on medical supplies

When Lawrence first fell ill, her mom said, "'Well, take a decongestant.'" And I was like, "I didn't think to bring that to college." She also didn't have a car, which meant getting out of bed and walking to the nearest drugstore. "So yeah, I wish I brought stuff like that."

Hayden's list of basic medical supplies to keep on hand includes topical antibiotics, adhesive bandages and soap for cleaning wounds; acetaminophen for pain; and ibuprofen to fight inflammation.

Don't forget a thermometer, she added. Students often don't know whether they have a fever, which can be a key piece of information to determine what kind of help they need.

3. Ask these questions before you leave home

If you take [prescription medication](#), you'll need to know what it is and how to get it filled at a local pharmacy, Shackleford said.

Students often find themselves in the dark about such processes, Hayden said. And they often don't know their own medical history. So they should ask their parents, "What are my past and current health conditions? Have I ever been hospitalized? What was it for?"

Family histories, such as whether anybody has had [heart disease](#), are important but can be a huge blank spot for students, she said.

Students with a complex health history should get a written summary from their health care professionals to share with their new health team, Hayden said. And if you've been working with a specialist that you can see only during breaks, go ahead and make that appointment now.

4. If you need help, ask

While battling colds and flu throughout her first year, Lawrence said she had checked in regularly with her campus health center. "I think that really helped me cope," she said.

Getting help early is the right idea, Hayden said. "That way, you can address these things head on, and hopefully get right back into college life."

Many student health centers aim to be more than urgent care clinics, Shackleford said. "We want to make sure that we are helping you learn how to be healthy during the four years that you're on campus," he said. That means learning about the importance of preventive care. "And if

you don't know that, come talk to us and we can teach you what that looks like."

5. Eating well

Healthy eating can be a challenge on a college campus. The "Freshman 15" may be a bit of a myth, but studies suggest undergraduates do gain up to 3 or 4 pounds, on average, in their first year.

It's easy to see why. Lawrence's main dining hall was an all-you-can-eat experience, with grab-and-go fast food as an easy alternative. Being on her own, she said, meant "nobody would tell me no. So I think that was really challenging to just, for the first time, to have to put a limit on myself and take [healthy eating](#) into my own hands."

That's an important realization, Shackleford said. "You have to look at your cafeteria, and you have to make health-conscious choices." Just because you can eat a hamburger and fries at every meal doesn't mean you should, he said.

Lawrence said making healthy choices got easier when she was able to start cooking for herself. She also made a conscious choice to not center her lifestyle on fast food. "I think everybody kind of gets to a point where that's just too much for them, and they try to change," she said.

6. Get out and move

Lawrence faced another challenge in rethinking her fitness routines. She was a dancer in high school, which meant at college, "I went from doing exercise every single day to not doing any at all."

Freshmen often end up disconnected from their high school fitness

routines, Shackleford said. But studies show that a student's overall well-being can improve when they stay physically active, he said. "So that is extremely important in maintaining health."

Student fees often cover on-campus gym access, he said, so you might as well take advantage.

Lawrence initially kept active by regularly walking a loop around her campus, then found she enjoyed taking part in workout classes.

7. Pay attention to mental health and stay involved

Shackleford has a poster on his office wall that reads, "Treat yourself well." For some, that might mean meditation or prayer. It could also mean playing a pickup game of basketball or listening to music. "You need to take that time to unwind to make sure that you do that to keep and remain who you are," he said.

Both doctors emphasized the importance of making social connections. "It really promotes your resilience," Hayden said. It also builds networks that can support you when you need it.

She encourages students to "put themselves out there a little bit, say yes to new experiences, even if it's a little out of their comfort zone," to find "that thing that's going to be sustaining to them outside of academics."

8. Have fun and be safe

Compared with high school, college life is unstructured. But "our bodies need regular schedules," Hayden said. "And to the extent possible, sticking to somewhat of a regular schedule for basic needs is going to really go a long way."

That means having a regular bedtime and a regular waking time, a time for regular meals, as well as time for moving around and socializing, she said.

Particularly when they get sick, Hayden tells students: "Now is the time where I want you to live like your mom is watching you. Eat what she would like you to be eating. Get to sleep like she would like you to be sleeping."

Of course, Mom isn't watching. "I'd be remiss to say that people aren't going to explore their freedoms in college," Shackelford said. And a lot of students feel peer pressure to take part in unhealthy ways.

His advice: Be your authentic self and build a circle of friends who are going to help you stay safe.

And while many students do engage in dangerous binge drinking and other unhealthy activities, Hayden reminds freshmen that "outlying behaviors" aren't the norm. "And we try to remind them of that often, so that they can see that the norm is that students are coming here with a goal, and your goal is going to be easier to reach if you pay attention" to healthy behaviors.

9. You've got space to figure it out

Freshmen have a lot to learn, Shackelford said. "It's almost like a baby eagle being thrown out of a nest and then being asked to soar." But the health system is there to help, he said.

College provides a cushion that others don't always get, Hayden said, likening it to having training wheels for self-care.

"Yeah, it's a big transition," she said. "But it's one that can be managed

with some good planning. This is what college is all about, right? Having this time and space to grow and learn."

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