

By Dr. Mike Evans

## Help young adults tackle the ‘Freshman 15’

Help your son or daughter make healthy food and lifestyle decisions in their new environment.

At colleges and universities across Canada, thousands of young people will start their first year of studies. As the parent of a student beginning university, I wonder how many other parents are like me — where my kid thinks they’re not ready (but they are) and I thought I was ready (I wasn’t). It’s an incredible time of change for our sons and daughters, which that includes the way they eat and how much exercise they get.

Most of our focus is on helping our kids find the right fit and supporting them as they succeed and fail academically or socially. One topic that surprised me in its profile [was the concept of the “Freshman 15.”](#) A Google search shows 460,000 Google hits on how to prevent your kid from experiencing this phenomenon.

The first thing to know is that research shows the typical weight gain is actually less, with students at colleges and universities putting on average about five pounds in their first year. That said, the weight gain for this group still happens at a faster rate than in the general population.

Once young people move away from home and into the dorm, their “choice architecture” changes. Their eating and activity options — what we call “nudges” — change completely. [They are introduced to unlimited meal plans](#), open buffets, and cheap fast food because they’re on a budget.

As Dr. Brian Wansink, who runs the Food and Brand lab at Cornell University, points out, most people don’t overeat because they are hungry. Instead of blaming kids, thinking about the change in choice architecture allows us to reframe freshman lifestyle choices as a new challenge.

Exercise also plays a critical role in keeping us well. Earlier this year, my colleagues and I helped launch a campaign called Make Your Day Harder. The idea was to help people build more physical activity into their lives by making small changes.

Those include taking the stairs instead of using the elevator or getting off the bus one stop before your destination. Micro-changes like these are also easy for students to incorporate into their lives.

Peer pressure and stress also play a big role. And while we mostly think of these as negative influences, they can also have a positive side.

I think of first-year university as one more developmental stage. Learning how to cook, make grocery store and restaurant decisions, self-triggered activity and so on are all skills we develop over time, but these often begin with independence from parents and the family home.

The “[Freshman 15](#)” isn’t as scary as many people think, and personally, I think it’s time to reframe it. Before you judge your kid, consider yourself. You know when you travel and your options change, you will often make less-healthy decisions.

And I think there may be more good news to come in the future. The current generation has a better awareness of healthy food and lifestyle choices than youth just five years ago did. It’s still too early to know how this will translate during the critical transition of the first year of post-secondary school, but I think there’s reason to be hopeful.

How to tackle first-year weight gain:

1. Focus on “choice architecture” not on the “Freshman 15.” Young adults, especially young women, already are aware of this. Instead of focusing on their weight gain, they focus on how to make healthy decisions in their new environment. Acknowledge that this can be challenging and some weight gain can be normal.

Understanding a university student’s typical day and re-engineering small ways to make mindless healthy eating or activity more the norm helps. Things like switching to water, taking the stairs, changing breakfast to oatmeal and snacks to veggies and dip, can all make a big difference. Our Make Your Day Harder campaign ([makeyourdayharder.com](http://makeyourdayharder.com)) is a good example of making these small tweaks.

2. Focus on skills. We like to think positive behaviours are all about inspiration and willpower, but in fact they are likely more about skills and confidence. Helping your young adult as they transition through this life stage to cook, shop for healthy foods and make smart ordering decisions at restaurants can have a lasting effect.

3. Work with your kid’s factory settings. The one thing I’ve learned having kids is that they all have different factory settings, and that there is not one fix-all solution. Taking the advice above and customizing it to your unique young adult is critical. Let them know you are not interested in perfection — you are interested in consistency. If your young adult keeps up with activity, but eats a little less healthy, in my mind that is a win.

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