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Staying healthy is important to Iowa State University student Pam Strang, a junior in food science. She became a vegetarian in high school and has continued her eating habits into college because of how she feels when she eats healthy. Strang said that she tries to eat healthy everyday and exercises as much as possible.

“It started out to lose weight, and eventually to feel better,” Strang said about her eating and exercise habits.

Strang said that by choosing to have healthy eating and exercise habits, “It gives you an overall better feeling over the day,” and that it clears her mind.

College students making the transition to living away from home often have the challenge of having a healthy lifestyle because of the different choices and behaviors that are frequently found at college. The lifestyles that a college student chooses can have an affect on both their physical and emotional health.

A report released by the University of Minnesota in November focused on the health of college students. Dr. Ed Ehlinger, director and chief health officer of the University of Minnesota’s Boynton Health Service, said that good health helps students stay in school and a college degree is an “excellent predictor of better health and economic status throughout one’s lifetime.”

According to an article in the 2004 Journal of American College Health, “The transition to college often poses new challenges for students in terms of dietary habits, having food choices determined by cafeteria meal plans or buying and planning food for one self for the first time since leaving home.”

Sally Barclay, clinician for the Food Science and Human Nutrition department, said that college freshmen have a big adjustment during their first year because students may have been active in high school, versus a more inactive lifestyle in college.

Barclay said students should be involved with intramurals, work out at the recreation center or participate in floor activities in order to have a more active lifestyle because they tend to be more sedentary and their activity levels may drop off.

Strang said that she walks everywhere because she does not like to ride the bus. “Physical activity is much more important than exercise alone,” she said.

“Over four years, students start to build habits” that can have negative or positive effects for their health in the future, Barclay said.

Studies are showing there are higher rates of Type 2 diabetes and cholesterol for students, Barclay said. She said that people should not wait to have a healthy diet as health risks may occur as unhealthy habits continue.

Screenings for health risks such as diabetes and cholesterol are being done much more readily, said Judith Trumpy, registered dietician for Thielan Student

Health Center. Understanding what the body is doing naturally with foods may help with choosing healthier food alternatives, Trumpy said.

According to the first issue of the 2006 Evaluation and Program Planning journal, “young adults are at a crucial stage in their development as they transition from parental control to assuming responsibility for their own health choices.”

“Not everyone gains the ‘freshman 15,’” Trumpy said, but rather two to three pounds in the first year. However, Trumpy said that a student’s weight might increase each year if they continue their unhealthy habits.

“Don’t panic if you start to gain weight,” Trumpy said.

One way to determine the need to change eating habits is for a student to see if they are overeating or skipping meals, Trumpy said. She said that students should also be aware if they are mindlessly eating or multi-tasking while eating.

Eating with others encourages a person to eat more, she said. The foods that friends choose to eat can influence what a student eats, Trumpy said.

Researchers from Harvard University wrote in an article in the 2007 New England Journal of Medicine, “The fact that people are embedded in social networks and are influenced by the evident appearance and behaviors of those around them suggests that weight gain in one person might influence weight gain in others.”

Trumpy said that students do not need to monitor their weight on a daily basis, but to notice how the fit of their clothes varies from season to season.

“Weighing only once a month or every other week on the same scale with similar clothing will help keep a handle on weight changes and allow time to make reasonable adjustments in food and activity habits,” Trumpy said.

If a student decides to improve their eating and wellness habits, Barclay said to begin evaluating habits by keeping track and writing down what a person eats in a day and his or her activity level. “Work a goal to address that,” Barclay said. She said to have specific and measurable behaviors that will help achieve goals.

Trumpy said that students should avoid dieting. “All you’re going to learn is that you’re hungry. Those that are successful [with dieting] will regain the weight,” she said. To lose weight, Trumpy said, “Take it off slowly.”

Many students will only buy the minimum number of meals on a meal plan, which gives them the tendency to snack more, she said. Trumpy says that students should keep more fresh foods, such as fruits, whole grain crackers, peanut butter and cereal, in their dorm rooms as healthier alternatives to processed foods.

The carbohydrates that are in fruits and vegetables are complex, which will help a person feel full from the amount of fiber, and by including these foods in a diet, a person will meet their vitamin and mineral needs each day, Trumpy said.

“There are no good or bad foods,” Trumpy said. There is only a difference in nutritional content and calories, she said.

She said that having a healthy weight starts by eating a variety of foods on a daily basis and then participating in some kind of physical activity.

“You are fifty percent of what you eat and fifty percent lifestyle,” Trumpy said.

Students have many ways that they can learn more and take an active role in having a healthy lifestyle at ISU. Trumpy said she gives presentations on topics such as healthy eating and stress every other week in the Oak-Elm, Maple-Willow-Larch and Union Drive Community Center dining center areas.

In the Wellness Center of the student health center, students can have nutrition and fitness assessments and learn ways to manage stress.

Strang said that eating healthy and exercising makes a person feel better about themselves. “It gives you more confidence,” she said.

Sources

Live Sources:

Judith Trumpy, registered dietician for Thielan Student Health Center (interviewed November 27)

Sally Barclay, clinican for Food Science and Human Nutrition department (interviewed November 28)

Pam Strang, junior in food science (interviewed November 30)

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“The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 years” in the New England Journal of Medicine, 2007

“Web-based nutrition education for college students: Is it feasible?” in Evaluation and Program Planning, 2006

“First every comprehensive report on the health of Minnesota college students looks at mental health obesity, financial health, sexual health and more,” press release from the University of Minnesota on November 15, 2007