

# The Biggest Health Risks for College Students



College is an exciting time for students. Yet, as their world opens up to new adventure and possibility, many health risks surround them. From illnesses to unhealthy lifestyle habits, learn about the biggest health concerns facing your college student and what you can do to help.

# Anxiety and depression

Mental health takes a toll in college, increasing the risk for anxiety and depression. With the pressure of exams, grades, and financial aid requirements, your student has a lot on their plate. Your teen is also on their own for the first time and learning how to fit into a whole new environment.

**What you can do:** If your teen is experiencing anxiety or depression, have them seek help from their campus's student health services. Therapy and other services are often included in their tuition and fees. Meditation classes and yoga can also help alleviate stress.

# Meningitis

Meningitis is an infection of the meninges, which is protective tissue surrounding the spinal cord and brain. It's one of the most common serious illnesses among college students. The bacterial form is of particular concern because of its quick onset. It can also lead to serious complications, such as brain damage and physical disability.

College students are at a higher risk of meningitis because they share close quarters with others. Infectious diseases like meningitis can spread rapidly in dorms, apartments, dining halls, and classrooms.

**What you can do:** The best way to protect your student from meningitis is to make sure they're vaccinated. Bacterial meningitis vaccines are usually first administered around the age of 11 or 12, but young adults as old as 23 may still get them. Booster shots may also be taken throughout adulthood if your doctor thinks your child is at risk.

# Other illnesses

Since most college activities deal with groups of people in close settings, a variety of other diseases can spread easily too.

These include (but aren't limited to):

- the flu
- antibiotic-resistant staph infections
- the common cold
- mono

**What you can do:** Besides meningitis vaccinations, make sure your college student is up to date with other vaccines. This includes an annual flu shot. Also, teach your teen good hygiene techniques, like regular hand washing, and encourage them to carry hand sanitizer when soap and water aren't available.

## Sexually transmitted infections

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) pose risks for college students, as well. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Trusted Source, up to half of all STIs diagnosed each year occur in people ages 15 to 24. Some STIs can clear up with medications. Others, like HIV, HPV (human papilloma virus), and HSV (herpes simplex virus) can have lasting effects.

**What you can do:** Make sure you talk to your teen about safe sex before they head off to college. Encourage both the young women and young men in your life to get vaccinated against HPV to prevent cancer of the genitals, cervix, and throat, along with genital warts.

While oral contraceptives and other birth control methods help to prevent pregnancy, only barrier methods like condoms and dental dams can protect

against STIs. If your teen is sexually active, they should be tested for STIs annually.

## Poor sleeping, exercise, and eating habits

College offers years of studying and bonding with others. With all this, your teen will likely experience lack of sleep and a poor diet. They also might not put aside enough time for a proper workout. While sleeping for four hours a night and eating ramen noodles may seem like part of the college experience, such habits can have long-term effects on your child's health and ability to get through school.

**What you can do:** Encourage your teen to manage their time well. They should be getting seven to eight hours of sleep every night and engage in physical activity for at least two-and-a-half hours weekly. You can also help them learn how to eat healthy on a budget.

## Top 10 Most Common Health Issues

1. **Physical Activity and Nutrition**
2. **Overweight and Obesity**
3. **Tobacco**
4. **Substance Abuse**
5. **HIV/AIDS**
6. **Mental Health**
7. **Injury and Violence**
8. **Environmental Quality**
9. **Immunization**
10. **Access to Health Care**

### Physical Activity and Nutrition

Research indicates that staying physically active can help prevent or delay certain diseases, including some cancers, heart disease and diabetes, and also relieve depression and improve mood. Inactivity often accompanies advancing age, but it doesn't have to. Check with your local churches or

synagogues, senior centers, and shopping malls for exercise and walking programs. Like exercise, your eating habits are often not good if you live and eat alone. It's important for successful aging to eat foods rich in nutrients and avoid the empty calories in candy and sweets.

## **Overweight and Obesity**

Being overweight or obese increases your chances of dying from hypertension, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, respiratory problems, dyslipidemia and endometrial, breast, prostate, and colon cancers. In-depth guides and practical advice about obesity are available from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health.

## **Tobacco**

Tobacco is the single greatest preventable cause of illness and premature death in the U.S. Tobacco use is now called "Tobacco dependence disease." The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that smokers who try to quit are more successful when they have the support of their physician.

## **Substance Abuse**

Substance abuse usually means drugs and alcohol. These are two areas we don't often associate with seniors, but seniors, like young people, may self-medicate using legal and illegal drugs and alcohol, which can lead to serious health consequences. In addition, seniors may deliberately or unknowingly mix medications and use alcohol. Because of our stereotypes about senior citizens, many medical people fail to ask seniors about possible substance abuse.

## **HIV/AIDS**

Between 11 and 15% of U.S. AIDS cases occur in seniors over age 50. Between 1991 and 1996, AIDS in adults over 50 rose more than twice as fast as in younger adults. Seniors are unlikely to use condoms, have immune systems that naturally weaken with age, and HIV symptoms (fatigue, weight loss, dementia, skin rashes, swollen lymph nodes) are similar to symptoms that can accompany old age. Again, stereotypes about aging in terms of sexual activity and drug use keep this problem largely unrecognized. That's why seniors are not well represented in research, clinical drug trials, prevention programs and efforts at intervention.

## **Mental Health**

Dementia is not part of aging. Dementia can be caused by disease, reactions to medications, vision and hearing problems, infections, nutritional imbalances, diabetes, and renal failure. There are many forms of dementia (including Alzheimer's Disease) and some can be temporary. With accurate diagnosis comes management and help. The most common late-in-life mental health condition is depression. If left untreated, depression in the elderly can lead to suicide. Here's a surprising fact: The rate of suicide is higher for elderly white men than for any other age group, including adolescents.

## **Injury and Violence**

Among seniors, falls are the leading cause of injuries, hospital admissions for trauma, and deaths due to injury. One in every three seniors (age 65 and older) will fall each year. Strategies to reduce injury include exercises to improve balance and strength and medication review. Home modifications can help reduce injury. Home security is needed to prevent intrusion. Home-based fire prevention devices should be in place and easy to use. People aged 65 and older are twice as likely to die in a home fire as the general population.

## **Environmental Quality**

Even though pollution affects all of us, government studies have indicated that low-income, racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in areas where they face environmental risks. Compared to the general population, a higher proportion of elderly are living just over the poverty threshold.

## **Immunization**

Influenza and pneumonia are among the top 10 causes of death for older adults. Emphasis on Influenza vaccination for seniors has helped. Pneumonia remains one of the most serious infections, especially among women and the very old.

## **Access to Health Care**

Seniors frequently don't monitor their health as seriously as they should. While a shortage of geriatricians has been noted nationwide, URMC has one of the largest groups of geriatricians and geriatric specialists of any medical community in the country. Your access to health care is as close as URMC, offering a menu of services at several hospital settings,

including the VA Hospital in Canandaigua, in senior housing, and in *your* community.