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How healthy is your lifestyle? Food, alcohol and drugs

Junk food, alcohol and drugs are temptations that are all too easily accessible to students. However, staying healthy does not need to be difficult. Read on to find out more

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Staying healthy at university does not need to be boring or expensive. Check out the top 10 “foods” for value and health, facts about drinking and the low down on drugs.

The Food Standards Agency produces a national food guide called “The balance of good health” that represents the proportions of various food groups that should be eaten for good health. The diet should be made up as follows:

- A minimum of five portions of fruit and vegetables (approximately one third of the food eaten)
- Four to six servings of starchy foods, preferably wholegrain, such as bread, cereals, potatoes, rice and pasta (approximately one third of the food eaten)
- Two servings of foods providing protein such as lean meat, fish, eggs, pulses and beans
- Approximately one third of a pint of milk, preferably skimmed or semi-skimmed, or its equivalent in the form of yoghurt or cheese
- Fatty and sugary foods should be kept

to a minimum, but can have a place in a healthy diet if the quantity eaten is kept under control

Top 10 “foods”

Soups make a filling, nutritious one-dish meal and can be prepared from almost anything. Large pots of chunky vegetable soup can be made with a mixture of cheap potatoes, carrots, parsnips and swede or any other vegetables in season and contribute towards your daily requirement of five portions of fruit and vegetables. Pulses such as lentils (or soaked chickpeas or split peas) can be used as a base, provide good sources of protein, B vitamins and fibre served with bread, and can be spiced up with some curry or chilli powder to give them a bit of a kick. Pasta, rice, noodles or dumplings added to soups make them even more substantial for a cold winter’s evening. Broths with lemongrass, ginger and prawns or smoked fish soups provide a lighter, more sophisticated touch and there are always chilled soups like tomato or gazpacho for summer. Avoid the packet and canned varieties

because they are often high in sugar and salt.

Breakfast is quoted as being the “best meal of the day”. Not only does it optimise mental performance, especially when problem solving or when remembering new information is required, it also helps fight obesity. Those who skip breakfast are 450 per cent more likely to have weight problems. Tucking into a bowl of cereal or some fruit juice and toast provides much needed energy after a night’s fast and gets the body working at its best again with less likelihood of consuming high fat or sugary snacks mid-morning.

Pasta dishes are versatile and quick and easy to make. Choose dried pasta over the more expensive “fresh”, supermarket variety and select a sauce. Try making your own sauces like rich meat-based bolognese sauces, vegetarian options with courgettes and aubergines, for example, and simple herb and cheese dishes. The sauces are meant to coat the pasta only and add its flavour to every mouthful, so a little does go a long way.

Fish is an excellent source of protein, vitamins and minerals. White fish is naturally low in fat and calories and generally requires only light cooking. Oily fish contain fats such as omega-3 fats that help your heart to beat more regularly and prevent your blood from clotting too quickly. Aim for at least two servings of fish per week, one of which should be from an oily source such as sardines, pilchards or mackerel. For all of these oily fish, canned is as good as fresh and much cheaper. Tuna, although an excellent source of nutrients, loses its omega-3 fats when canned so is counted as a white fish.

Fruit and vegetables provide antioxidants, fibre, vitamins and minerals and they can help maintain a healthy heart and reduce the risk of some types of cancers. Eat at least five portions per day. A portion is equivalent to:

- ▶ One piece of fresh fruit, like a banana or an orange
- ▶ Two pieces of small fruit, such as plums or satsumas
- ▶ One large slice of fruit, eg, melon
- ▶ One cupful of berries or grapes

- ▶ Two to three tablespoons of fresh fruit salad, stewed fruit or canned fruit (drained)
- ▶ One tablespoon of dried fruit, like raisins or apricots (can easily be mixed in with a breakfast cereal, as fruit cake or eaten as a snack)
- ▶ One glass (150 ml) of pure fruit or vegetable juice (only counts as once per day)
- ▶ Three tablespoons of vegetables, raw, cooked, frozen or canned
- ▶ One dessert bowl of salad

Casseroles are practical one-pot meals that can be left cooking or prepared well ahead of serving. They retain all their nutrients and natural goodness and are ideal for the cheaper cuts of meat that require tenderising by long, slow cooking. They can vary from rich, winter stews with lots of healthy vegetables to lighter fish casseroles or spicy pulses flavoured with garlic.

Salads do not need to be boring. Forget limp lettuce leaves with a round of cucumber and a sliced tomato! Be adventurous and vary ingredients to include foods like nuts, canned pulses, grated and chopped vegetables, fruits like apple or raisins, grated cheese, lean meat or fish. Winter salads with red cabbage or hot roasted peppers mean that you do not need to pay high prices for out of season ingredients.

Milk is a prime provider of calcium in the diet. This is particularly important for bone health and to prevent osteoporosis in later life. Bones stop growing in length between the ages of 16 and 18 years but continue to grow in strength into the mid-20s when they achieve their peak bone mass. Other sources of calcium include cheese, yoghurt, canned fish with bones (like sardines), green vegetables, and dried fruits and nuts. Choose semi-skimmed or skimmed milk for a lower-fat option with the same amount of minerals.

Water is the cheapest and best drink for health. Forget expensive bottled waters and drink 1–2 litres of tap water per day to keep hydrated.

Wholegrain cereals provide us with energy in a slowly-released form as well as boosting fibre and vitamin intake and providing bulk in the diet to help you feel

full. They have been linked with a lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes and some types of cancers (such as colorectal and gastric) and decreased risk of ischaemic stroke (particularly in women). Regular consumption of wholegrain cereal such as breakfast cereals, porridge or wholemeal breads makes adults more likely to meet the recommended dietary fibre (non-starch polysaccharide) intake of 18g per day.

Alcohol

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in the UK. The vast majority of people who drink do so without causing harm to themselves or others and alcohol can be an integral part of social life. However when done to excess it brings health risks such as liver damage, gastric problems and depression. Alcohol is also expensive and this can result in financial difficulties.

Students are vulnerable to the problems of alcohol because of the prevailing drink culture at universities, and studies suggest that 10 per cent of students drink to dangerous levels. The advisable unit limits for alcohol are 21 units per week for men and 14 for women (a unit being half a pint of beer, a pub measure of spirits or a small glass of wine). The message about alcohol is to be sensible and drink within your limits.

- ▶ UK teenagers are among Europe’s heaviest drinkers and 16–24 year olds are most likely to “binge drink” (drinking twice the recommended guidelines in one day). Avoid binge drinking and abstain from alcohol for at least 48 hours per week.
- ▶ Alcoholic drinks come in different strengths, measured as % by volume. The higher the % marked on the label, the stronger the drink will be. Alcopops often contain more alcohol than many beers, lagers or ciders.
- ▶ Never drink and drive.
- ▶ Drink with friends and do not leave a pub, club or party with strangers.
- ▶ Small amounts of alcohol will make you feel less alert. In larger amounts, it causes hangovers and an inability to get out of bed and concentrate on morning lectures.
- ▶ Alcohol can increase sex drive; however performance will suffer.
- ▶ You can get a criminal record through

drunkenness. Being drunk is no excuse if you end up in court on a charge of criminal damage or violence.

- ▶ Around 40 per cent of accident and emergency admissions are alcohol related — 70 per cent between the hours of midnight and 5am. Make sure you are not one of them.

Drugs

There are three main types of drugs:

- ▶ Stimulants (eg, tobacco, ephedrine, amphetamines, ecstasy, crack, poppers) which increase the activity of the central nervous system
- ▶ Depressants (eg, alcohol, solvents, tranquillisers, heroin) which reduce the activity of the central nervous system

- ▶ Hallucinogens (eg, cannabis, magic mushrooms, LSD) which alter perceptions of reality

All drugs carry a range of risks such as dependence (both physical and psychological) and health problems. There are the more immediate issues such as problems related to injecting (eg, septicaemia or blood-borne infections like hepatitis or HIV) or sniffing (damaging the mucosa inside the nasal cavity) as well as the longer term damage done by the specific drugs (like depression, liver damage, lung cancer). Drug taking has a serious effect on eating behaviour with unattractive outcomes such as hair loss and spots as well as having a major impact on the immune system.

Additionally, they all affect judgement and can release inhibitions and so increase the likelihood of you ending up

in situations you may normally wish to avoid with unwanted consequences such as pregnancy. When taking drugs you do not know how much of the active ingredient they contain and as a result have no control over the effects and consequences.

For more advice on specific drugs and their effects visit www.nistudentsdrugs.info or www.surgerydoor.co.uk/drugs

Academic and career considerations It is an offence for the occupier of any premises to allow the production or supply of drugs or the smoking of cannabis. This includes the scenario of having friends back to your room or flat and not stopping them from sharing drugs.

If you are a first time offender charged with possessing drugs for your own use, it is possible that you may only receive a caution. However, a caution means that you have a criminal record and that has implications for your future study and career:

- ▶ Possession of drugs can lead to heavy fines and imprisonment
- ▶ Many universities expel students caught in the possession of, taking or supplying drugs. They may also inform the police if they are not already aware. Additionally they will not provide a reference so making it difficult to transfer to other courses or universities
- ▶ Drug convictions create difficulties when applying for some travel visas
- ▶ More employers are introducing mandatory drugs tests for potential employees (some drugs can stay in your body for over a month)

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society states that “as part of registration, a preregistration student has to declare any criminal cautions or convictions. Anyone who does declare is then referred to a Statutory Committee to be assessed as to whether they can register as a pharmacist. All declarations are looked at on a case-by-case basis.”

The only way to avoid problems and issues associated with drug use is not to use them at all! 🙅