

Is it difficult for students to lead a healthy lifestyle while attending University? A pilot study

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Several US studies have shown that propensity to weight gain amongst ‘freshman students’ (first-year university students)^(1–3) a common trend, with variability in weight gain ranging from two to fifteen pounds. These findings indicate that entry into the 3rd level education system (university and colleges of higher education) may be a critical time-point in the pathway to adult overweight and obesity for some students. While several Irish studies have examined the dietary intakes and weights of Irish schoolchildren^(4–5), teenagers^(6–7) and adults^(4–5), currently there are no comprehensive dietary intake and weight studies amongst Irish university students.

The present pilot study set out to explore whether entry into 3rd level education has any negative impact on diet, lifestyle and weight status.

The pilot study was conducted at Dublin City University (DCU). Thirty students from each of the Schools or Faculties in DCU were recruited, giving a total of 120. After informed consent participants completed a short questionnaire exploring whether their diet, lifestyle and weight status had improved, deteriorated or remained the same since starting University. Subjects were weighed using a portable calibrated weighing scales in their bare feet with their outer clothing removed. Heights were also recorded. An equal gender mix was sought at each School or Faculty but was not always achieved. First-year students were excluded. Data were analysed by SPSS version 11 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Males represented 46.2% of the participants and 53.8% were females. The age range was 18–36 years, overall mean age 22.05 years, males 22.69 years, females 21.50 years. The majority of participants (80.7%) were undergraduates. Health since starting college was rated as ‘less healthy’ by 39.5%, ‘the same’ by 37.8% and ‘healthier’ by 22.7%. Weight was reported by 58% to have ‘increased’ since starting college, the range of weight gain being from <3.17 kg 15.6% to >12.7 kg 4.7% of participants. Weight was reported by 25.2% to have ‘stayed the same’ and 16.8% reported a ‘decrease in weight’. Diet was stated to be ‘less healthy’ since starting college by 42.4% of participants, while 40.7% said it was the ‘same’ and 16.9% said it was ‘healthier’. Of the participants 41.2% said that they ‘exercised less’ since starting college, 30.3% said they ‘exercised the same’ and 28.6% said they ‘exercised more’. An ‘increase’ in alcohol intake since starting college was reported by 58.7% of respondents. It was found that 32.8% of participants were overweight, of whom 63.9% were males and 36.1% were females. Those who fell into the obese category comprised 6.4% of the sample.

These results indicate that entry into the 3rd level education system may indeed be a critical point in the pathway to a less-healthy lifestyle and diet as well as a shift in weight status towards overweight and obesity and may indicate a time-point for a strategic policy intervention. Further research is needed.

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