College Students: Making Sure the Best Times of Your Life are Not the Unhealthiest

By Milly Canela

You’re busy and feel like you’re starving so you pop into the dining hall, get a slice of pizza, some French fries and a soda, then bolt out to do more work. Sound familiar? Everyone has different variations of this at different stages of college. During these times we just want to get the foods that are easiest and taste good so we can get on with our busy college lives.

This type of grab and go eating is not generally a problem if it’s once in a while but, for many students it can become a habit. The appeal of these foods is clear, they are convenient and yes, they taste good. You probably noticed that I didn’t mention any fruits or vegetables in my example. Fruits and vegetables are essential to a healthy diet and when you don’t eat the recommended amount you miss out on essential nutrients and dietary fiber. It’s easy to think “That’s not me!” but according the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010 almost all Americans over the age of 2 do not get the recommended amount of vegetables a day. For fruits the same is true except for those 4 years and older.

Example of Fruits
1 cup of fruit =
- 1 cup of applesauce
- 1 small apple
- 1 cup of grapes
- 1 large orange
- ½ cup of raisins dried apricots

Daily Recommendations for Vegetables
3 cups/day (men) 2 ½ cups/day (women)

Example of Vegetables
1 cup of vegetables =
- 1 cup of chopped broccoli
- 2 cups of raw leafy greens like spinach or romaine lettuce
- 1 cup of red peppers
- 1 large baked sweet potato
• 1 large ear of corn

How hard is it to grab a few pieces of fruit, steamed vegetables, or put together a salad instead of that piece of pizza or those fries? A sweet potato with skin instead of a baked potato, a spinach salad instead of a salad with lettuce, adding kidney beans or chickpeas to a salad, throwing in different berries or fruits to yogurts and cereals are simple ways to get these healthy foods into your diet.

It has also been found that 19-30 year olds receive greater than 50 percent of their fruits from juice. What’s wrong with juice? Nothing when it’s 100% juice and it’s consumed in moderation but most of the fruits you take in should be from whole fruits because you get the dietary fiber that juices lack. If you’re someone who loves soda you might want to look into switching to 100% fruit juices. Don’t over consume them though because that can add unnecessary calories to your diet and it is not as beneficial as whole fruit. Soda does not give your body any essential nutrients and instead tends to fill you up so that you do not have room for healthier foods.

There are a number of nutrients that are of concern for the American public because the foods that contain them are under-consumed. These nutrients are folate, magnesium, dietary fiber, vitamin A, C, and K and fruits and vegetables are great sources of them.

**Folate**

Is extremely important in the basic processes your body needs to perform like growth and the reproduction of cells including blood cells. It’s also especially important for women who are able to become pregnant. If a woman gets pregnant with a diet that’s insufficient in folate in the first few weeks after conception her baby runs the risk of suffering from a neural tube defect that could in some cases lead to the infant being born without a brain. By the time someone realizes they are pregnant it could already be too late to start eating more folate rich foods.

Good sources of folate:

• Whole Grain Total Cereal
• Spinach
• Chickpeas
• Broccoli
Magnesium
Magnesium is involved in hundreds of reactions in the body, dealing with DNA, proteins, and activities that give your body energy to function.
Sources of magnesium:
- Spinach
- Black Beans
- Potato
- Almonds, Peanuts

Dietary Fiber
Dietary fiber is not digested by the body. However, it is beneficial because it makes you feel full and since these food groups that are high in fiber tend to be low in calories it is great for calorie control. It is also essential to healthy bowel functions. It’s been found that dietary fiber can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, and type 2 diabetes.
Get your dietary fiber from:
- Fruits
- Vegetables

Vitamin A
Vitamin A is essential for vision and keeping many processes in your body working normally like growth and immunity. It also keeps your bones and skin healthy.
Vitamin A rich foods include:
- Sweet potato with skin
- Carrots
- Spinach
- Cantaloupe

Vitamin C
Is an antioxidant that reduces damage from free radicals which are linked to certain types of cancer and chronic diseases.
Good sources of Vitamin C:
- Red Pepper
• Fruits/berries
• Broccoli

**Vitamin K**

Is important in maintaining the process that allows you to form blood clots and also helps with bone formation.

Vitamin K rich foods include:

• Spinach
• Broccoli
• Grapes

There really is no downside to consuming more fruits and vegetables. You get essential nutrients to keep your body healthy and lower your risk of chronic diseases.

You may think you have no time and that for college convenience foods are the best you can do. However, think about it, if you can’t put in the time to make healthy choices now do you really think you’ll have much more time once you graduate and start working full time? Or even later when you might be juggling work AND family? Adult life is right around the corner and learning how to incorporate healthy habits is not only going to make you happier during college but make sure that later on in life you’re not dealing with the consequences of an unhealthy diet.

**References:**
