

Off to College?

» Health Issues to Remember

If you're heading to college, taking care of your health is one of the many things you should consider to make the best of this exciting journey. Below are some specifics about physical examinations for entry to college, as well as other considerations to help you stay healthy at school.

Physical Exam

Most colleges require a physical examination to be performed by a health-care provider prior to the start of classes. Your nurse practitioner will take a full medical history and measure vital signs such as your height, weight and blood pressure. If you are a woman, the NP will likely perform a breast exam to check for signs of cancer. Your NP may also screen you for tuberculosis risk. College athletes may be required to undergo a more detailed physical examination. You'll also need to verify your vaccination records.

Vaccines

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends several vaccines for college students, including one for meningitis, a severe bloodstream infection. Here are some facts about meningitis:

- Meningitis is spread by close contact with an infected person (coughing, kissing) and has been known to spread in dormitories.
- Symptoms include fever, headache and stiff neck.
- The infection progresses quickly and can lead to organ damage, loss of limbs, permanent neurologic damage or even death.

The CDC recommends vaccination against meningitis for all college freshmen who live in dormitories.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus that causes genital HPV. Genital HPV infects skin membranes and causes genital warts. But because warts or other symptoms may not appear for a while or appear only sporadically, the infection is easily transmitted unknowingly. HPV can cause some types of cervical cancers.

The CDC recommends HPV vaccination for girls 11 to 12 years old, or adolescent girls and women ages 13 to 26 who have not yet received the vaccination. The HPV vaccine is given in three doses; the second injection is given 2 months after the first, and the third is given 6 months after the first.

The combined tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis (Tdap) vaccine is also

recommended by the CDC. Additionally, you should receive any of the following vaccines that are not up-to-date:

- hepatitis B series
- polio series
- measles–mumps–rubella series
- chickenpox series (a second shot is now required).

The CDC also recommends that college students get a yearly influenza virus vaccination.

Sexual Health

Most college health centers provide sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing and birth control services, sometimes for free. If you are sexually active, be sure to practice safe sex by using condoms and talking to your partner about his or her sexual and STI history. Signs of an STI include abnormal discharge, burning while urinating, itching and, for women, pain during intercourse and bleeding between periods. See your NP if you're experiencing any of these symptoms.

Lifestyle and Mental Health

College life can be stressful. Alcohol abuse, tobacco use, anxiety and depression are common challenges. Alcohol abuse is especially common on college campuses and can cause many health problems. According to the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, moderate alcohol use means drinking up to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women and older people. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to curb your drinking if you have experienced any of the following:

- feelings that you may need to cut down on your drinking
- comments from others about your drinking
- feelings of guilt about your drinking
- drinking in the morning to steady your nerves or cure a hangover.

Mental illnesses such as mood disorder, anxiety and depression are also common on college campuses, and many schools offer mental health services to help. Mental illnesses are treatable — your nurse practitioner or college health clinic can refer you to available services. NP

Information for this patient handout was compiled from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American College Health Association and the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Additional Notes:
