

Dorms With Dining Halls Might Add to Freshman Weight Gain

3 August 2010, By Glenda Fauntleroy

If college students gain weight during their first year in school, it might have a lot to do with how close they live to their campus dining halls and exercise facilities, a new study reports.

Researchers wondered if college freshmen assigned to dormitories with onsite dining halls gained more weight than did their peers who have to walk a little further for meals.

Although the average weight gain in freshmen has been widely called "the freshman 15," lead author Kandice Kapinos, an assistant research scientist at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, said they anticipated less gain.

"We know that there are other factors that influence weight gain - such as genetics and [social environment](#) - so we were not even expecting the physical environment effects to be close to five pounds," she said.

The study, which appears online in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#), included 388 freshmen who were assigned randomly to seven different dormitories, four of which had onsite dining halls that served three meals a day. All students had access to two campus gymnasiums with state-of-the-art exercise equipment.

Students reported how many meals they ate each day and how many times per week they exercised. Females in dorms with onsite dining halls weighed almost two pounds more and exercised 1.43 fewer times per week than females in dorms without dining halls. Male students in dorms with onsite dining halls also ate about 1.5 more meals and almost three more snacks per week than did their peers in other dorms.

Living closer to a gym increased the frequency of exercise for females but the authors did not find proof that distance from the gym affected weight gain.

"This study confirms what we as public health practitioners have believed for a while," said Jeanie Alter at the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at Indiana University. "Location is not only important in real estate. It's also important when it comes to [health behaviors](#), and proximity of food and exercise facilities influences our behavior."

"Though this study found a small weight differences between groups, those pounds add up over time without a change in behavior," Alter said.

More information: Kapinos KA, Yakusheva O. Environmental influences on young adult weight gain: evidence from a natural experiment. *J Adol Health* online, 2010.

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