

Commentary by  
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leading author on  
parent relations

# THE HEALTHY STUDENT

**A Parent's Guide to  
Preparing Teens  
for the College Years**

By Dr. Lawrence Neinstein,  
leading specialist in adolescent healthcare



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# Introduction

Having personally gone on many campus tours and worked with parents and my own children on spreadsheets for choosing schools, I can visually see the questions and concerns about their school choices.

- \* What is the academic reputation?
- \* How big are the classes?
- \* How are the lectures?
- \* How are the residential halls?
- \* What is the social life like?
- \* What is the campus like?
- \* What is available at the Student Union/Campus Center and what is the food like?

While you may have seen the reviews, reports and the rankings of schools, in general these articles neglect to discuss some issues that can make serious differences in a student's experience at school. These include medical and mental health issues. This booklet will review important health issues for you and your son or daughter to consider before the college semester starts. It also includes a brief checklist to help you remember these items as the hectic time comes closer to pack for that first semester at college.

In addition, it's important for parents to have an open dialogue about college-life and expectations with their children before they go off to college. I realize that this is a difficult task and have asked famed author Helen E. Johnson, *Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years*, to help advise on the best way to do so. She has developed some suggested talking points (see "Commentary: Start Talking Now and Don't Stop") to help make this important discussion easier. Following her points, I will continue with other important items for parents to consider.





## Commentary: Start Talking Now and Don't Stop

A college freshman is essentially a high school senior without parents around. New students are usually enthralled with the instant freedom they have in college and excited about the new friends they're making. The vast majority of college students do well academically and stay physically and mentally healthy; however, too many students today stumble into high-risk behaviors and situations, unaware of the dangers and consequences.

Very soon you are going to lose whatever control you have of your adolescent's daily behavior, but you can still have influence. While you will not be the **only** influence in your adolescent's life, you can be the **best** influence.

Don't assume that your son or daughter knows how you feel about difficult topics, such as underage drinking, drug use, and 'hooking up' (e.g., sexual encounters). Believe it or not, your son or daughter wants to know where you stand. Start talking now and don't stop, even if your college-bound child seems to be tuning you out.

### *Here are some ways to begin the conversation:*

\* "When you get to college you're going to be faced with making decisions every day. At first you may be a bit overwhelmed with so many choices. I want to talk with you about some of the important decisions you'll be making and let you know how I expect you to handle the freedoms and responsibilities of college life. I love you very much and that means I worry about your health and safety. It's my job as your parent to talk with you about some of the high-risk behaviors that could put you in danger."

\* "Under-age drinking is a problem on most campuses. I'm concerned about out-of-control drinking at parties and wonder if you've thought about how you'll handle those situations."

\* "I understand that drinking and drug use figure prominently in incidents of sexual abuse, date rape, and other forms of violence. Each year 1,400 college students die in accidents related to alcohol and 500,000 are injured. Let's talk about some ways you can protect yourself if



you find yourself in a dangerous situation. I'd also like to talk about what you can do to intervene if you witness a friend in trouble."

\* "First and foremost, I expect you to respect yourself and others. This means never, ever driving while drunk or being in a car with a drunk driver. Drinking at your age is against the law and I expect you to be a law-abiding citizen. If you break the law and are charged with under-age drinking, there will be serious consequences – you may be expelled from school and have a record that will close doors to future options. One bad decision can change your life."

\* "I also expect that, if you make bad choices, you will acknowledge your mistakes and do whatever you need to do to resolve your problems. All of us make mistakes. The important thing is that you learn from your choices, because your choices will shape who you will become. I'll be here to listen when tough decisions are looming and to help you handle mistakes and disappointments, but the consequences of your behavior will be yours to face and manage."

\* "There will be many people on campus who can help you if you are in trouble. I expect you to use the resources that are available to you. I believe that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness."

\* "You'll be treated as an adult on campus and the hallmark of a truly independent adult is the ability to make sound choices and accept responsibility for them. I know there will be times when you'll want to fit in and go along with the crowd, but I hope you'll choose your friends wisely. I want you to have a wonderful college experience, and I think you will if you are thoughtful about the decisions you make."

\* "I'd like to hear how you're feeling about these issues and what you think about these ideas."





# 1. Independence and Confidentiality Issues

Most freshmen are approximately 18. They are becoming young adults and in most states are leaving the ranks of minors and are able to vote, serve in the armed forces and make adult decisions and sign contracts. They are also able in most states to make all medical decisions and sign medical consents. This can be a hard adjustment for both parents and the adolescents. While this transition has already begun during junior high school and high school, the change is more dramatic when a young adult leaves home and embarks upon a more independent life in college. It is important for parents to help facilitate a student's ability to function and make decisions on their own.

Medical consent and confidentiality are areas that can cause concern and friction between parents and campus or non-campus healthcare providers. College age students, in general, have the right to consent for their medical treatment and the right to confidentiality over their medical information. In most states, breaking this confidentiality and releasing information without permission from a student is against the law.



It is helpful for parents to understand that healthcare providers may not release information about the healthcare of their children to anyone without the student's signed consent. This can be difficult for a parent to understand, particularly if they may be paying a significant portion of the tuition. However, confidentiality can be an important part of the student becoming an adult and helping the student to talk openly with their healthcare provider. Counseling services will usually also have a policy of strict confidentiality.

If the college-bound student will be an unemancipated (still under guardian supervision) minor when arriving on campus, the parent should sign a generic "consent for treatment" form and forward it to the college health service. Many colleges and universities provide this form or statement on their prematriculation (college enrollment) health history form. Parents should also be aware that some medical conditions in an unemancipated (still under



guardian supervision) minor can be treated without parental consent. These may include contraception, and the diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, mental health problems, and/or substance abuse.

**Alcohol Use:** Starting in 1998, federal law allows, but does not require, colleges and universities to notify parents any time a student under 21 violates drug or alcohol laws. Since then, many colleges and universities have adopted a policy of mandatory parental notification if a student is found to be involved in risky or illegal behavior such as public drunkenness, drug use or criminal activity. Policies vary from campus to campus and usually the school's policy is published in their school manual or website.



# 2. Pre-College Health Exam

As you are helping your child prepare for college, it is important to have their health history reviewed by a clinician to make sure all of their medical information and other necessary medical care is up to date. This doctor visit marks the beginning of the transition for the teen from healthcare that often was supervised by you to healthcare that will be in many or most cases the student's personal responsibility. It is important for the clinician to review medical concerns that may affect the student's school performance, including health risk issues such as smoking, drinking, drug use, eating disorders, sexual history and mental health concerns. Prematriculation (college enrollment) health requirement forms should be filled out and the student's immunizations should be brought up to date. This may also be an important time to confirm that your adolescent's blood pressure and cholesterol are normal.





### 3. Immunizations

Immunizations are an important, but sometimes complicated, issue. There are quite a few immunizations that should be either given or brought up to date before students go off to college.



Some colleges will have forms that require certain prematriculation immunizations and other schools may have recommendations. Some schools do not provide this information. However, to avoid delays in enrollment and even a hold on your son or daughter's student account, it is important to check the school's requirements and provide the appropriate documentation.

*Recommendations include:*

- Hepatitis A:** Students living in or attending college in states, counties or communities where the average rate of hepatitis A is greater than the national average should consider receiving the vaccine (2 doses). The following states have rates of hepatitis A greater than the national average:

Alaska*	Missouri	South Dakota*
Arizona*	Montana	Texas
Arkansas	Nevada*	Utah*
California*	New Mexico*	Washington*
Colorado	Oklahoma*	Wyoming
Idaho*	Oregon*	

\* In these states hepatitis A vaccination is recommended.

- Hepatitis B:** This vaccine prevents hepatitis B disease and its serious consequences, like hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer). Therefore, this is the first anti-cancer vaccine. Medical, scientific and public health communities strongly endorse vaccination as a safe and effective way to prevent hepatitis B, which can be 100 times more contagious in some settings than HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Even though the three-shot hepatitis B vaccination has been part of routine infant immunization since 1991 and has been further recommended to all children and adolescents up to 18 since 1999, your teenager still may not have been vaccinated. If individuals have not been vaccinated, it is strongly recommended they receive the three dose series before college.
- Influenza:** "Flu" vaccines should be strongly considered in college students each fall. This infection can lead to an illness lasting a week or more, keeping students out of class during that time period. Students need to remember that this vaccine only prevents influenza, not all the other viruses that can cause respiratory infections.
- Meningococcal meningitis vaccine:** This vaccine only is directed against the bacteria that causes one type of bacterial meningitis. This vaccination should

be strongly considered. While meningococcal meningitis is typically uncommon in college age individuals, freshmen living in residential halls are at greater risk. Meningococcal meningitis can cause serious life threatening infections very rapidly. Should an outbreak of meningococcal disease occur on campus, even those who have been vaccinated (and had possible exposure) should seek medical attention. The vaccine protection lasts about 3-5 years. This vaccine is mandatory at some colleges and universities.

- MMR (measles, mumps, rubella):** Students should have a second vaccination in primary school or junior high school. If they have not received this, they should get a second vaccination before going to college.
- Polio:** They should have completed the series as children. Routine re-immunization before college is not necessary.
- Tetanus-diphtheria booster:** Your teenager should get a tetanus-diphtheria booster if he or she has not received one within the past 10 years.
- Varicella (chickenpox):** Recommended if there is no history of physician-diagnosed chickenpox or if varicella vaccination was not received during childhood or adolescence. Requires two doses in adolescent or college age students.

The above-mentioned vaccines are safe and effective.



### 4. Health Insurance

Health insurance can be one of the most critical issues and needs among college students. It is unfortunate that up to 25% to 30% of college students have no health insurance. Since most colleges have no overnight medical facilities, parents should ensure that their college-bound students have adequate health insurance to cover hospitalization, emergency room visits, specialty care and expensive diagnostic health services. An unexpected serious illness or medical expense can interrupt or even terminate a college career. Even if students have medical insurance, many do not know the details of their health coverage or may have insurance that does not cover them in the geographic area in which they are attending school.

Health insurance is complicated and difficult for everyone to understand. However, there are some things to look for in your own coverage or in the coverage provided by the school your son or daughter is attending:

- \* **Network:** Does the coverage include care in the geographic area where your son or daughter is living?
- \* **Deductible:** How much are you going to have to pay before the insurance even pays the first dollar?
- \* **Copay:** How much are you going to have to pay for each medical visit?
- \* **Lifetime maximum:** How much total lifetime coverage is there? Some policies are inexpensive because they provide \$25,000 to \$50,000 lifetime maximum or maximum payment per incident. This does not provide the needed coverage for serious medical problems that can occur.
- \* **Pre-existing conditions:** Does the policy exclude pre-existing conditions and if so, for how long? Does your son or daughter have any pre-existing conditions that might preclude their coverage?
- \* **Specific coverage:** Is there coverage for issues that might affect college students such as mental health problems, eating disorders and substance abuse issues? Are they covered for club sport injuries or NCAA athletic injuries (for student athletes)?
- \* **Insurance card:** The student should be advised to carry a copy of his or her health insurance card in their purse or wallet at all times. It is also critical that your son or daughter know what coverage they have and how to contact the insurance company if needed.
- \* **School sponsored policy:** Often a school sponsored plan can be more comprehensive, more cost effective and more specific for the issues that affect college students. Examine your policy and the one offered by the college to make an informed decision.



## 5. Tuberculosis Skin Test

This test is mainly recommended for students who come from an international location with high rates of tuberculosis or who have been exposed to tuberculosis. It is also generally required yearly in students working in a healthcare environment.



## 6. Medical Records and Prescriptions

If your son or daughter has had chronic medical problems, it is an excellent idea to have your primary care provider send the campus health center a summary of their care, needed interventions, any restrictions on activity and medications used. If the problem involves a disability, it is important to contact the office of disability and let them know about any special accommodations that might be needed for your son or daughter. This is much easier to work out if the office is not informed at the last minute.

It is also important for the student to be knowledgeable about his or her own personal health problems. This may include:

- \* Medications (including a list of medications, doses, frequency and why the medication is prescribed)
- \* Allergies to medications and foods
- \* Significant family medical history
- \* Prior health problems and records as mentioned above



## 7. Student Health Center

College-bound students and parents should seek out the available health resources on campus. The resources might range from large, multi-specialty centers providing all outpatient primary care, specialty and diagnostic services to a health center providing basic first aid.

Overall, college health services provide high-quality, low-cost, accessible primary care and health education services. In addition, there are usually mental health counseling services available, as well as health promotion and prevention services. Students and their parents may wish to research what services are available and what the student health fee (if any) covers in order to avoid complications or confusion down the road.

In addition, it is always helpful to find out information about after-hours care and emergency services, pharmacy services, and the location of the nearest hospital and/or emergency room sooner rather than later in the event an emergency does occur.



## 8. First Aid Supplies

Believe it or not, students are sometimes unfamiliar with handling minor medical problems or even taking their own temperature. Frequently, one of the first questions a student will be asked if they call in to the health center with an infection is what is their temperature. The typical response is either: "I do not have a thermometer" or "I do not know how to take my temperature."

Every student should have some basic health care supplies and equipment to deal with minor illnesses and injuries.

*Suggestions include:*

- \* First aid kit with band-aids, antibiotic ointment, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, medications for a cold
- \* Digital thermometer
- \* Chemical cold pack (to reduce swelling after a fall, for example)



## 9. Conclusion

Entering college is a transitional landmark that goes beyond leaving home. As discussed in this health booklet, parents will no longer be personally responsible for attending to the daily healthcare needs of their son or daughter. It is a time for adolescents to learn the process of self-care and good health practices. Parents can assist with this process by "letting go" of some of the day-to-day involvement and allowing students to engage in more of their own decision-making. Campus health services and other college staff will assist with this transition through one-on-one counseling, education and programmed health promotion activities on campus. With proper parental guidance, incoming college students will be well on their way to a state of optimal health – physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, and spiritually.



## 10. Checklist

### Pre-college health exam:

Make sure your son or daughter gets a comprehensive examination before they go off to school.

### Health insurance:

Make sure the student has appropriate medical insurance and carries a health insurance card with them. This includes a policy that provides adequate coverage in the geographic area they are living in.

### Immunizations:

Check with your doctor about the following:

- **Hepatitis A:** Should be considered at colleges located in states with higher rates of infection (requires 2 doses). See list of states in Immunizations section.
- **Hepatitis B:** Mandated in some states and is strongly recommended, if not received previously during childhood or adolescence (requires 3 doses).
- **Influenza:** Should be strongly considered each fall.
- **Meningococcal meningitis vaccine:** Strongly consider, mandatory at some universities.
- **MMR (measles, mumps, rubella):** Booster needed during primary or secondary school or before college.
- **Tetanus-diphtheria booster** (within ten years).
- **Varicella (chickenpox):** Recommended.

### Tuberculosis skin test:

If required by the college or if suggested by your son/daughter's healthcare provider.

### Medical records and prescriptions:

Students should have a record of their prescriptions including doses and reason for medication. In addition, for students with chronic/serious medical problems, a summary should be sent to the college health center.

### Student health center:

Identify available health resources on campus and be familiar with resources at night and on weekends for emergencies.

### First aid supplies:

Bring small container with band-aids, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, cold medications, digital thermometer and chemical cold pack.



## About the Authors:

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### **Helen E. Johnson**

Helen E. Johnson, co-author of the widely acclaimed advice book, *Don't Tell Me What To Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years*, is the nation's leading consultant to colleges and universities in the area of parent relations. She founded Cornell University's first parents program and is the parent of two recent college graduates. Johnson lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

