Women’s Health Issues: The College Years

Being in college is a period of tremendous growth with many exciting opportunities. College women are pulled in a variety of directions, often making it difficult to balance their lives. They rarely spend much energy on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, addressing personal safety issues, and putting safeguards in place to help prevent illness later in life. Add behavioral choices and pressures surrounding the use of alcohol and other drugs, smoking, nutrition, and sexual activities and things can get pretty hairy.

But, they don’t have to! Many college women practice good health habits that lead to successful student and professional careers. Knowledge is power. Help your student educate herself and take responsibility for her physical, mental, and emotional health.

Taft College in Taft, California offers the following health checklist for women on their Student Services webpage:

**Daily:**
- Exercise for at least 20 minutes
- Protect yourself from the sun by using sunscreen and dressing appropriately
- Watch your fat intake
- Eat 2-3 servings of protein, 6-11 servings of grain, 3-5 servings of veggies, and 2-4 servings of fruit
- Be aware of your alcohol intake
- Maintain a healthy level of stress

**Monthly:**
- Perform a breast self examination
- Perform a full body examination to look for unusual moles or skin conditions and changes in teeth, gums, or tongue
- Maintain a healthy weight

**Yearly:**
- Have a dental checkup 1-2 times a year
- Have an eye exam, especially if you experience problems or visual changes
- Have your blood pressure and cholesterol levels checked
- Have a pelvic exam and Pap test every 1-3 years
- Get a flu shot

Source: www.taft.cc.ca.us/newtc/studentservices/health/women_issues.htm

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**Body Image & College Women**

Although women of all ages experience dissatisfaction with the appearance of their bodies at some time in their life, body image issues seem to be most prevalent in women age 25 and younger. Many women come head to head with body image problems during their college years. According to *The College Women’s Handbook*, this could be because:

- Students in college are taught to analyze and scrutinize everything they read, hear, and see.
- College is a time of self-exploration. This often includes coming to grips with some tough stuff… for some, it can be easier to focus on what they look like on the outside, rather than what’s going on inside.
- Most fashion magazines, media messages and images are targeted to this age group.
- Being a perfectionist in college is not only socially acceptable but often socially desirable.
- College women bond over body issues and self criticism; dieting and exercising together are common, which often reinforces insecurities.
- There is a lot of pressure to make a good first impression—over and over again. Arriving on campus as a new student, applying for jobs and internships, trying out for the school play, rushing sororities, and meeting significant others make women feel as though they have to look perfect.

Having a healthy body image is okay. So is worrying about how you look. But, when this turns into an obsession, negative behaviors can result. Eating disorders are a real problem for many women in college.

You can help your student develop positive self-esteem by focusing on all of her strengths and talents. Encourage her to lead a healthy lifestyle that includes eating nutritionally, exercising regularly, getting plenty of rest and relaxation, and having fun—no matter how stressful daily college life can get.