

A Healthy Start to College

By Lee Bernard, MSN, MPH

College is an exciting time for students and parents alike. There is a lot of preparation leading up to the final moment that the high school senior becomes a college freshman. Here are some important health issues for you and your son or daughter to consider and review before the first day of college classes.

While your son or daughter is adjusting to the changes in their environment it can be hard for the parents to realize that parents have very little control over their college-aged child's day to day activities. While parents may still pay the bills, the average college freshman is 18 and considered an adult. A student's signed consent is required before medical information may be shared with anyone besides the student.

If you were able to have dialogue about life experiences before college, continue to share your opinions and expectations regarding decision-making, time-management, grades, socializing, alcohol and drug use, sexual activity, and responsibility for choices with your student. While the student may not seem terribly interested in hearing your views, they need to know what you think and expect.

Some things to consider before your student leaves for college:

Pre-college Health Exam-check to see if a physical exam is required.

Medications-Make sure your student knows the name and dose of any medications they take and have an adequate supply to get them started. Be able to list all allergies.

Vaccinations-some schools require proof of certain immunizations. A tetanus booster is required every 10 years. Hepatitis B immunizations may be required by health-related programs. The CDC recommends that all residential students receive the

meningitis vaccine. Flu vaccinations help reduce outbreaks in dormitories and shared quarters.

Health Insurance-Adequate health insurance to cover hospitalization is a minimum requirement. Many students continue to be covered under a parent's plan. See if the school requires coverage or accepts and bills your insurer. Students need to know about co-pays and phone numbers to call to ask questions regarding covered benefits.

Campus Health Centers-find out what services are provided to your student. Know the location and hours before the need arises. Some schools include fees for health services in the tuition bills. Does the center have laboratory and/or pharmacy services?

Immediate Care-If the health center is closed, where will your student go?

First aid-a basic first aid class is a good idea so students know how to handle fevers, sprains and other minor ailments. Send supplies of commonly used, over-the-counter medications, cold and hot packs, an elastic bandage, and a thermometer and see that the student knows how to use them.

College often provides greater freedom for the student and may cause anxiety in parents and students. Counselors and healthcare providers are available to ease the student's transition to independence, if needed. Advance preparation may ease some of the anxieties associated with the transition to college life.