

7 Staying safe and well

Just as in any other time of your life, staying healthy and safe is your number one priority. However, it's often a slightly bigger challenge if you're not living in your own country. Also, this might be your first time away from home. As an international student, this part of your life as a student can often cause a great deal of worry and concern for yourself, but also your family back home. This chapter will help you learn good practices for eating and staying well, and give you advice on how to avoid any dangerous situations.

Food

“You are what you eat” is a common phrase in English that reminds you to eat well so you're healthy. While you're studying, make sure you eat healthy food as much as possible. Your diet should include fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and protein (e.g. lentils, eggs, meat). You should also make sure you drink plenty of water.

Eating well is not always that easy on a typical college/university campus. Even if your residence or campus sells healthy foods, most students are easily tempted by cheap, tasty junk food. This is why so many students put on weight at college. In the US, this is called the “Freshman 15,” because the average American student puts on 15 pounds (7 kg) in their first year! Drinking lots of beer is another common reason for gaining weight.

Here's a list of the most popular student food and drink throughout English-speaking countries:

- burgers
- pizza

- sugary cereals
- ramen, or instant, noodles
- take outs/takeaways (e.g. Chinese or Indian curries)
- macaroni and cheese (usually instant)
- kebabs
- fries and chips/chips and crisps
- soda or other fizzy drinks
- ice cream
- cookies and other biscuits
- chocolate in every shape and form
- fried everything, from chicken to chocolate bars
(especially if you're studying in Scotland)

These are junk food examples, and obviously, students eat a bigger variety of foods than that. But these are extremely popular and make up a large part of many students' diets, especially in the early months and years of college/university, when they're often finding it difficult to organize their studies, part time jobs, and free time.

If you live in a dormitory or student halls of residence, eating well may be a bigger challenge. Though you'll often have access to some sort of a cafeteria either in your building or nearby, you'll also have a regular flow of junk food coming from your roommate, your floor, or at gatherings. You will have to decide how to control how much of it you enjoy to avoid fast weight gain.

If you can, it would be a good idea to have a small refrigerator (common in North America) so that you can keep healthy options such as yogurt, milk, or fruit and vegetables.

If you live in an apartment, house, or certain types of student accommodation, you'll have a kitchen, which helps the situation a lot. Make sure that you have a good supply of fresh fruit and vegetables, lean meats, wholegrain breads,

brown rice, etc. Many of these foods can be found in “quick cook” versions (things such as rice), so that it’s easier and takes less time to prepare.

How to save money on food

One thing that students often find a bit shocking is the price of food in English-speaking countries compared to many other parts of the world. Here are some tips on how to spend less while still eating well (and hopefully saving time).

- Buy essentials, such as rice, in bulk (large amounts).
- Buy food whenever it is on sale. Look for two-for-one offers (ideally on healthy food).
- Go to discount food chains such as Lidl (North America and the UK) or Aldi (UK, eastern states of Australia) to get good-quality basics at a much cheaper price.
- In Australia, small fruit and vegetable shops often sell produce a couple of days old out the front of the shop at very cheap prices.
- Check whether there is a market in your area where you can buy fresh food. Markets are usually only open on weekends or on set days, but the produce they sell is usually cheaper and fresher than what you can buy in a supermarket.
- Research the grocery store/supermarket options in your neighborhood ... there’s often a big difference in pricing. Traveling further to a cheaper one can save you money if you’re buying a lot. There are usually places locally that you can walk to or take public transportation. If not, you could go together with friends in a cab/taxi and buy lots of big items, like rice and pasta that will last you all semester/term.
- Buy fruit and vegetables in season. Those that are not in season will be much more expensive. Ask for help

in the produce section, or go to websites such as www.visualnews.com for a guide to the seasons for different fruits and vegetables.

- Look for food that is close to its “sell-by date” (“use-by date” in Australia). These are often discounted.
- In North America, shop when it’s samples day. Many grocery stores will have free samples on Friday afternoons or other times of the week. You can eat lots while shopping by trying out various samples throughout the store.
- Save expensive ingredients for special occasions.
- If you want to cook Asian food, don’t buy it at general supermarkets. It’s usually much cheaper in China Town, or in the many Asian-specific markets or shops that you can find all over English-speaking countries. This is also true for South Asian (especially Indian) and Mexican in the US.
- Look on websites and apps to download vouchers or coupons that you can use to get money off items you would usually buy anyway.
- Get the customer loyalty card of the supermarkets and coffee shops you use. Many of these give you points or stamps that add up until you can get some free food or drink.
- It may be worth joining student discount schemes. By paying a small amount for a National Union of Students (NUS) card in the UK, you’ll be able to get discounts in certain supermarkets and restaurants.

Exercise

Doing regular exercise helps you stay healthy. Many students join a gym to stay fit. If you want to do this, check whether your campus has a gym—this will probably be cheap and might be a good way of making friends as well. If you don’t like the gym, or don’t want to pay for one, there are plenty

of other options. Take up a new sport, go swimming a few times a week, or join a hiking group. If you live off-campus but not too far away, try walking or cycling to your classes instead of catching the bus or train. This is a great way to stay fit for free!

Healthcare

The basics

The healthcare situation varies wildly between countries in the English-speaking world. Most countries will have a universal or public health system such as the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, although it is still a good idea to get medical insurance. In Australia, the public health system is called Medicare, but international students aren't eligible to use it. If you're in Australia on an international student visa, you must take out private health cover to cover you during your stay.

The US has a private system, and without health insurance, you'll be in big trouble. Something like a minor surgery can cost thousands of dollars. Before you leave, you must find out what the insurance situation is in your new country. This is absolutely vital for the United States, but may also be needed in other countries as supplemental insurance might be needed for people on student visas.

Emergency care

Most big hospitals in English-speaking countries have a department where people go for health emergencies. This is called the "Emergency Room" (ER) in the US, "Accident and Emergency" (A&E) in the UK, and "Casualty" in Australia.

Even in the US, you have the right to be seen by a doctor in the ER whether you have insurance or not. However, if you don't have insurance in the US, you will leave the ER with a shockingly high bill.

Emergency care is just that—for emergencies only. Some students may go to the ER or A&E for headaches. This is not an appropriate place to go for a headache, and again, may result in a huge bill in the US. Emergency care is for:

- life-or-death situations such as: major injuries in a car crash, heart attacks, asthma attacks, etc.;
- broken bones of any kind;
- extreme vomiting and diarrhea;
- any hard hit to the head;
- bad burns to the skin;
- extreme allergic reactions;
- high temperatures in children;
- a temperature of 105°F (40°C) in adults;
- sudden, severe pain that makes it hard to talk or breathe;
- bleeding that you cannot stop;
- problems talking or if you're unable to understand what is happening.

ER, A&E, or Casualty is not for:

- headaches;
- colds;
- influenza (unless you're having trouble breathing, can't stop vomiting, etc);
- sore throats;
- small cuts and bruises.

For these kinds of things you should book an appointment to see a doctor.

Finding a doctor

Your college/university will usually have a health center on campus to help you with non-emergency care. You can also, of course, find a general practitioner (GP) or family doctor in your neighborhood or community. Again, the process for doing this will vary from country to country. Your student

services office should be able to help you. In the UK, don't wait until you're ill, but register with a doctor as soon as you arrive. Show that you're a student and tell the doctor that you want to be an NHS patient if you want to avoid paying the cost of private treatment.

Antibiotics

In many countries, people can now get antibiotics without a prescription. Organizations such as the World Health Organization have been warning patients all over the world in recent years about using antibiotics too much. You'll find that many doctors in the Western world are being much more careful about prescribing antibiotics, and that they cannot be bought from a pharmacy or chemist without a prescription. Many students will ask for them for colds or influenza, but antibiotics will not work for these illnesses. You must accept this as part of medical care in English-speaking countries.

Climate and health

Many students will come to climates that are very different from their own. At first, you may have a lot of colds, or new allergies may develop later, as your body adjusts to the new climate and weather patterns. Remember that it takes your body time to adjust, so eat really well, drink a lot of water, and get enough sleep, especially in the first few weeks after your arrival.

Weather will probably be a new challenge for you. Having the right clothes and equipment for your new climate will make you much more comfortable. If you're coming to a cold climate, it's probably best to set money and time aside for a visit to an outdoor store after you arrive. The local knowledge and suggestions on good quality, warm clothing and boots will make all the difference. However, if you're arriving in Canada, say, in January, you might want to buy at least gloves

and a hat before you arrive in case they're sold out locally. Rather than wearing just a thick jumper, it can be a good idea to wear lots of layers of clothing. This helps you to keep warm better, and it means you can take off layers of clothing when you go indoors. Some countries do not have air conditioning to regulate the temperature inside public buildings.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

If you visit your college/university health center, you'll probably hear about STDs. These are diseases such as:

- HIV/AIDS;
- chlamydia;
- herpes (both oral and genital);
- human papilloma virus (HPV);
- gonorrhoea;
- trichomoniasis;
- syphilis;
- genital warts;
- pubic lice.

Some of these cause itching or rashes, but many of these diseases do not show any symptoms or problems for a few years after you get the disease. For that reason especially, they spread from person to person without anyone knowing until it's too late.

How can you protect yourself from these diseases?

The best protection is to not have sex. However, that is not always an option.

You should:

- wash before and after sex;
- use condoms (though they don't protect you 100% from STDs or pregnancy, they're still extremely good at preventing these diseases);

- not have sex if you have an STD until you've been treated and your doctor says it is OK;
- not share towels or underwear;
- take a test for HIV before you have sex;
- get a Hepatitis A and B vaccination.

If you think you might have an STD, your campus clinic or family doctor can help you with going through the testing process. In the UK, there are also sexual health clinics.

Road safety

Walking on busy roads

Each year in the US alone, over 4,000 people are killed by cars while they are crossing the road by foot according to www.pedbikeinfo.org. Major campuses have many busy roads running along or through them, and many students are eager to cross at dangerous points or times. Sometimes, they're crossing carefully at a crosswalk/pedestrian crossing and still get hit by a driver who isn't paying attention.

Here is some advice for crossing the road safely on campus:

- Cross at traffic lights and crosswalks/pedestrian crossings only.
- Look both ways a few times (especially if you're from a country where they drive on the other side of the road).
- If you're wearing headphones, don't have the volume up too loud.
- Keep your cell phone/mobile phone in your pocket—texting and walking can be as dangerous as texting and driving!
- Don't expect drivers to slow down for you.

Jaywalking

“Jaywalking” is when you don't use the correct crosswalk/pedestrian crossing to cross the road. You cross

the road anywhere you want. In the US and Australia, you can get fined if you jaywalk, so be careful!

This isn't the case in the UK. In the UK, pedestrians tend to cross when it's safe, so don't be surprised if people cross when the lights are red for them, but don't follow people just because they cross—it may no longer be safe for you. At zebra crossings, make sure the cars have seen you. They're supposed to stop if they see you, but they don't always do so.

Riding a bike

Bicycles are extremely popular on college and university campuses. Remember that, just like when you're walking, drivers often can't see you. You must always be very careful when you're on your bike. Here are some dos and don'ts.

Do:

- Wear a helmet.
- Use correct hand signals for left and right turns so drivers and other cyclists know what you are doing.
- Lock your bike up, putting the lock through the frame as well as one wheel.
- Have a light at the front and back of your bike if you ride at night.
- Stop at stop signs and stop lights. If you don't, it's very dangerous, and you might also get a ticket from the police.
- Buy a tire guard for your back tire (it keeps you from getting the mud stripe up your back!).
- If you buy a rack for the back of your bike, you can find bags that will attach, and you can carry your shopping home with you.

Don't:

- Don't listen to loud music on your headphones.
- Don't ride when the weather is terrible, such as in heavy rain, snow, or ice.

Mopeds and motorcycles

Mopeds are a very popular way to get around campus, especially in North America. Mopeds are inexpensive to buy and run, and are easier and cheaper to park than a car. They're especially useful in warm climates, but are also great during the late spring, summer, and fall/autumn in colder climates. They can, however, be quite dangerous. In Australia, you'll need to get a license to ride a moped. In the UK, mopeds are not that popular on campuses but if you did get one, you'd need a provisional license first.

When driving a moped or motorcycle:

- Remember that drivers might not see you.
- Always wear a helmet.
- Don't listen to loud headphones.
- Be careful of what is on the surface of the road, especially on curves and turns.
- Don't ride in extreme weather such as snow or extreme heat.
- Remember that you must have a separate license (your driver's license for the car doesn't work for the moped or motorcycle).
- Consider buying leathers if you're going at high speeds (they offer some protection to your skin if you fall).

Driving a car

In some places, such as London, having a car isn't at all necessary. However, if you're going to college/university in a small town in Australia or the US, you're going to need one. They can offer a great deal of freedom and excitement (think of the typical American road trip movie!), but they also require a lot of care and can be very expensive.

Getting your license

Many students will try to drive without a license. This is never a good idea. If you get caught, you'll receive a ticket or worse, depending on where you are. An international license is not always valid either.

In the US, for example, many states have different rules about this. You can go to www.usa.gov for more specific information on this situation. The best thing is to get a local driver's license, which also shows that you fully understand the driving rules and signs in your new country.

The rules about overseas licenses also differ from state to state in Australia. In most cases, someone who has a valid driver's license from another country is allowed to drive in Australia for up to 3–6 months. After this time, they're expected to get a local driver's license.

In the UK, if you have an overseas driving license already, you're likely to have to take a British driving test between 6–12 months from your arrival.

Finding a car

In many situations, it's best to buy from a local, well-known car dealership. If you buy from a member of the public, it's much harder to know what you're really getting. If money is an issue, go to a certified used dealership. The cars have been inspected, and if there's a problem, you have somewhere to go back to. Remember that all cars in the UK that are more than three years old should be sold with a Certificate of Roadworthiness (showing that it passed an "MOT test"). You'll need to make sure your car is registered, kept taxed and insured, and that you get MOT tests every year.

Other drivers

Drivers in Western countries are often more cautious than in many other parts of the world. They also pay attention (in most cases) to the rules of the road. You must do the same.

If you come from a place where the driving rules are more relaxed, you must try to change your thinking and drive more like the locals. This will keep it safer for everyone (and help you avoid being stopped by the police!)

Drunk driving/Driving under the influence of drugs

Each country, state, or province will have its own laws on drunk (or “drink”) driving. There’s usually a set limit to the blood-alcohol level that’s acceptable to the police. If the police think you’ve been drinking or taking drugs, they’ll stop you and give you tests to decide how much you’ve had. This usually includes the breathalyzer, which measures your blood-alcohol level. Any drinking before driving is a bad idea, however, as it hurts your reaction skills and judgment.

Some possible consequences of drunk driving/driving under the influence of drugs:

- If you’re in Minnesota, USA, you can get 90 days in jail or a \$1,000 fine (plus all the cost of legal fees).
- If you’re in Australia, and you’re caught drunk driving, you can be fined up to \$1000 and have your license suspended for up to a year or more.
- If you’re in the UK, you can go to prison, get a fine of £2,500 or more, and get a driving ban.
- You could spend \$10,000 for all your legal fees.
- You might kill someone, yourself, or your passengers by causing a car accident.

Cabs/Taxis

Cabs/Taxis are generally safe in most Western countries (especially black taxis if you’re in London). You should, however, always use a well-known cab/taxi company that is recommended by a local person. Sexual assault is not a frequent issue with cab/taxi drivers but you should always be cautious. Some women prefer to take a cab/taxi with a

friend. Also, instead of sitting next to a driver, it may be wise to sit at the back if you're concerned about your safety.

Public transportation

Depending on where you go to college, you might have just cabs/taxis and buses as options, or you could have an entire network of trams, subways (or “metros”), and trains. As with cabs/taxis, if you're a woman, it's better if you travel with a friend (especially at night). It's also a good idea to learn the lines on the trains before you travel so that you don't look lost on the train.

Alcohol

In Chapter 6 we mentioned that alcohol can be a large part of students' social lives in Western culture. In this section, we'll give more information about the potential dangers and how to stay safe.

The legal drinking ages vary, but are mostly 18 years of age everywhere, except for the US, where it's 21.

Minimum age you must be to drink alcohol

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Canada | 18 or 19, depending on the province or territory |
| Australia | 18 |
| New Zealand | No minimum age to drink, but to buy alcohol, you must be 18 |
| South Africa | 18 |
| The UK | 18 |
| The Republic of Ireland | 18 |
| The United States | 21 |

Drinking outside

It's important to note that in the US, you cannot drink outside. Walking on the street with a beer in your hand is illegal. Drinking can happen on a licensed outside terrace or patio, as soon as you get out of the legal space onto the sidewalk or street, you must put your alcohol away.

In Australia, you're allowed to drink outside in some public places, but not all. Places where you're not allowed to drink are called "dry zones," and may be marked by signs. Some entire suburbs in large cities are dry zones. If you plan to drink outside, check the local laws.

Drinking responsibly

You might not have drunk alcohol in your home country, but you may decide to try it. You should be careful at first, because you'll have to learn your limits. Some people tolerate alcohol well, others don't. There are certain things you can do to make it a more positive experience.

Do:

- Eat before or while you drink. Drinking a lot on an empty stomach can make you very sick.
- Drink water between alcoholic drinks to keep your system and stomach happy.
- Try different types of alcohol, but not together! Mixing drinks can make you very sick.
- Pay attention to the alcohol content in different types of drinks. Beer is usually the lowest volume of alcohol, then wine, then hard liquor.
- Be very careful with cocktails as it's difficult to know exactly how much alcohol you're drinking.

Don't:

- Don't be embarrassed to say no to drinks if you don't want them. Some people in the English-speaking

countries are teetotalers, which means they don't drink alcohol. Feel free to say "I'm teetotal."

- Don't rely on hangover pills and drink whatever you want—they don't really work in most cases.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help if you think you've drunk too much and are in trouble physically.

Binge drinking

Binge drinking can sometimes be a problem on campuses. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) in the US, binge drinking is defined as: "a pattern of drinking that brings a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 grams percent or above. This typically happens when men consume 5 or more drinks, and when women consume 4 or more drinks, in about 2 hours." (http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Newsletter/winter2004/Newsletter_Number3.pdf). In the UK, drinking is considered to be binge drinking if men have more than 8 units of alcohol (e.g. three pints of beer) and women more than 6 units (e.g. two large glasses of wine) within a short period of time. For some students, binge drinking is becoming a common and socially acceptable way of behaving on a "big night out." It's also something that can be encouraged via social media. However, many problems can occur while binge drinking including:

- confusion/difficulty speaking clearly ("slurred speech");
- vomiting;
- increased risk of sexual assault/or having unprotected sex (without condoms);
- injury from falling;
- blackouts (where you lose consciousness);
- blood alcohol poisoning;
- fights.

What to do if a friend has had too much to drink

Never leave a friend who has had too much to drink alone. If they've passed out (lost consciousness), you must keep them on their side. Vomiting while on their back could cause them to stop breathing because the vomit can fill their lungs. Try to get them to a hospital where they may need to have the contents of their stomach pumped out. It's also possible that they may end up in the "drunk tank" if you're in the US or Australia. This is a place for you to be cared for while you wait for the effects of the alcohol to leave your body. It can be at your college/university health center, if you're lucky. If you're unlucky, it might be at a jail. The situation may be unpleasant so it's better to avoid it altogether by drinking sensibly!

Drugs

Drugs are illegal in most countries across the world. There are some states in the US where marijuana has recently become legal, such as Colorado and Washington, but in all other states and in other countries taking drugs is illegal.

Having said this, you may see students taking drugs. Much of the time this is marijuana. Occasionally you might see students taking hard drugs (sometimes called Class A drugs) such as cocaine, meth, and heroin. All of these drugs carry huge fines, jail sentences, and serious dangers to your health. Overdosing (becoming very sick or dying due to taking too much, or too strong a drug) is always a concern.

You might also see some students taking other drugs such as Ecstasy, especially when dancing in nightclubs or at parties. This drug can be very dangerous as it leads to severe dehydration, when your body doesn't have enough water.

As with alcohol, taking drugs makes you feel out of control, and as with alcohol, you should never drive if you've been taking drugs.

Date rape drugs

There have been cases where a person put a drug into someone else's drink in a bar or nightclub, to make it easier to rob them or to take them home. To avoid this situation, only accept drinks from people you trust, and make sure that you always have your drink with you. Don't leave it on a table, for example, while you go to use the bathroom or go dancing; ask a friend to guard it and do the same for them.

Sexual assault/Rape

This can be a concern for any student, especially female students. Remember that rape is a major crime in all English-speaking countries, and sex with someone always requires mutual consent.

mutual consent: If you give your consent to something, you give someone permission to do it. In this case, you have both agreed to have sex, it is not being forced onto you.

The best ways to avoid theft, sexual assault, or rape:

- Don't drink to excess or take drugs.
- Don't walk alone at night.
- Use the safe walk or safe drive services if they are available on campus—they're usually free.
- Don't take public transportation or cabs/taxis alone.
- Don't feel badly about avoiding talking to someone who makes you uncomfortable.
- Carry a whistle or an alarm with you to get help if you're attacked.
- If you're out with friends, make sure you all know where you're meeting, and stay together.