How to help your college student stay healthy away from home  By Michelle Healy, USA TODAY

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In between picking out new bed linens and shopping for textbooks, college-bound students and their parents often overlook a crucial area of preparation — ensuring physical and mental health while on campus.

By Shawn Rocco, AP

College students should address key issues before move-in day.

"For many young people, this is their first time living away from home for any extended period of time," says psychiatrist Victor Schwartz, medical director of The Jed Foundation, whose Transition Year program promotes emotional well-being at college.

Although most will get through with only minor hiccups, the freedom and temptations that accompany college life can sometimes result in problems, he says.

How students handle issues around diet and nutrition, academic stress, relationships, finances and pressures to engage in excessive drinking, drug use or unprotected sex "can make serious differences in their experience at school," says adolescent and young adult medical expert Lawrence Neinstein, co-author of The Healthy Student, A Parent's Guide to Preparing Teens for the College Years, published by the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine.

By addressing key issues before school begins, parents and students can avoid many bumps in the road, say experts, who offer this advice for getting off to a healthy start:

• **Get vaccinations, medical exams:** Nearly all colleges require documentation of up-to-date immunizations, but don't forget a pre-college health exam, as well, says Neinstein, executive director of the University of Southern California student health center. It should include discussion of smoking, drinking, drug use, sexual history, health disorders and mental health concerns, he says.
Jennifer Haubenreiser of the American College Health Association: Says it’s important that students with problems reach out to health services for help.

**Plan ahead for emergencies:** Have your health care provider prepare a written summary of any acute or chronic conditions for college records. "In case of a crisis or some state of distress, having this information allows for much better care," says Schwartz.

Parents and students should review the details of the students' insurance plan. Does it provide coverage when traveling to another state? Can they access an in-network provider away from home? How do school-sponsored plans and the parents' plans compare? "You want a comprehensive plan that covers the kinds of things that can occur to emerging young adults," including mental health, substance abuse and reproductive health issues, as well as injuries, says Neinstein.

**Self-help 101:** In addition to knowing their basic health status (allergies, prescription medications and significant family medical history), students should have necessary prescriptions, medical supplies such as Epi-pens (to treat allergic reactions), and be prepared to handle minor medical problems. Neinstein recommends students have on hand basic supplies such as bandages, antibiotic ointment, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, cold remedies, ice pack (to reduce swelling) and a digital thermometer.

**Prioritize sleep, good nutrition and exercise:** "The chronic fatigue that some students contend with is often what's behind issues of overeating," says Schwartz. "Many people eat more when they're tired. When someone has chronic fatigue they can be more irritable or anxious. They can even look depressed. Talk to your child about monitoring these (habits) and keep track of them — don't be overly rigid, but don't let them fall apart."

**Encourage the use of support services on campus.** Most campuses offer services to "help a range of students' needs, from disabilities to previous substance abuse issues to chronic medical illness," says Jenny Haubenreiser, president of the American College Health Association and director of Health Promotion at Montana State University in Bozeman. Unfortunately, students tend not to know about or use all of the services available to them. Although "we can't monitor that they are taking their prescription meds … they can come to us and say 'I have a health issue, where can I get assistance?' "

**Stay alert to stress, anxiety and emotions:** Demanding academics, too many social activities (or failure to make friends), homesickness or money problems can easily lead to stress, depression or worse. A 2009 study by The Jed Foundation found 13% of college students have had a diagnosed mental health condition and 10% reported signs of moderate to severe depression. Haubenreiser says it's important that students with problems reach out to health services for help getting back on track and get referrals to specialists if needed. Parents who suspect that a student is struggling "can be very proactive about this, and encourage their children to connect with a caregiver on campus."