Understanding campus resources key to staying healthy at school

By Neil Schoenherr

The millions of college freshmen starting school this fall have a lot on their minds making the grade, meeting new friends and being on their own. Another new challenge they'll face is staying healthy.

Alan Glass

While students face a variety of health issues including illnesses, stress and sexually transmitted infections the key to wellness is knowing the resources available on their campuses, explains a college health expert at WUSTL.

"For many students, up until this point, someone else has been actively involved in their health care," said Alan I. Glass, M.D., director of the Habif Health and Wellness Center and a board member of the American College Health Association.

"The transition to college is a time when students assume responsibility for their health and one of the best ways to do that is by becoming familiar with the variety of health services offered on their campus."

Although health professionals are there to assist when needed, knowing some basic self-care is important too, Glass said.

"Students spend a lot of time in large groups in their residence halls and classes," he said. "They pass many different kinds of germs, including those for cold and flu and other upper-respiratory infections."

Students should be aware of the importance of getting enough rest, following good hygiene practices, taking vitamins, having a healthy diet and engaging in regular physical exercise to help ward off the common illnesses of being at college, he said.

Stress management

The transition to college, while a very positive thing, has a certain amount of stress surrounding it.

Stress, along with the adaptation to a new schedule and possibly not getting enough sleep, can negatively affect the immune system.

"Stress-related illnesses affect college students everywhere," Glass said. "College students these days are used to an expectation of high performance. With that comes a baseline level of stress. It can be a real challenge for them to realize when they are stressed, because for many of them it is commonplace."

Students who feel overwhelmed should seek help.

"If the student senses that stress is affecting his/her personality or the way he/she interacts with other people, that is a definite red flag," Glass said.

"Sleep, exercise and learning how to prioritize tasks are essential to stress management. It's also important to keep the lines of communication open with parents and friends to discuss problems."

The American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment reported that in 2005
depression was the fourth most common health issue affecting academic performance.

"Depression is definitely something to be aware of," Glass said. "Students need to know the signs of depression, which include sleep disturbance, deterioration in academic performance, loss of appetite, disconnection from friends and weight loss or weight gain."

Depression can be difficult to diagnose.

"Many of the signs of depression can also be signs of more simple adjustment issues," he said. "If a student thinks that maybe they need to talk to someone, that is probably a good time to seek out help. If you feel you might need help, act on that feeling."

Risky behavior

"Students need to be aware of decisions related to high-risk behavior that can occur in college, such as alcohol and drug use and sexual behavior," Glass said. "The best piece of advice I can give on the subject is to be aware that those things are out there and to know your campus resources in case you need them."

Most campus health centers offer information and programs for dealing with alcohol abuse and how to protect against sexually transmitted diseases.

Health history

"It's important for parents and students to have open communication about the student's health history," Glass said. "Students need to understand their own health since they will be increasingly responsible for it."

It's also good to know your insurance information. "In our society, health insurance equals access," Glass said. "Students need to be aware of what kind of coverage they have. Many colleges have insurance that students can purchase or the student may be on their parents' plan, but they need to be aware of what coverage that plan provides."

Starting college is a life transition and many students look at it as an opportunity to change how they do things. One thing they should not change without consulting their health-care provider is stopping medications.

"If students have been on chronic medications, like those for allergies, asthma and mental-health conditions, they should not stop them on their own, unless advised by a health practitioner. Doing so can be quite dangerous," Glass said.

"I guess if I could offer just one piece of advice for all college students, it would be to become familiar with the physical and mental-health services offered at your school. Those people care about you and your well-being. In most cases, the resources are out there, you just need to find them."