MAINTAINING YOUR HEALTH THROUGHOUT YOUR STUDY IN THE UNITED STATES

Staying healthy is an essential part of academic and personal success. There are many things you can do to care for your health, avoid accidents, and prevent illness, for example:

- get enough sleep
- eat well
- brush your teeth regularly
- wash your hands frequently
- exercise regularly
- stay hydrated by drinking water
- get a flu shot
- dress appropriately for the weather
- wear seatbelts when traveling
- reduce stress.

Despite your best efforts, there will likely be times when you don’t feel well and need medical care or medicine. In some cases, you can purchase an over-the-counter remedy yourself at the pharmacy (with advice from a pharmacist), stay home, rest, and recover within a few days. But if your symptoms are severe or if they do not respond to your own care within a few days, you should visit the student health center for help. See the section below, “Seeking Health Care in the United States.”

Some international students are reluctant to stop studying and attending class, even if they are sick. But it is irresponsible to continue working because you risk your own health and may risk making your roommates and classmates sick by ignoring your symptoms. In addition, a small problem can grow much more serious if it is not treated promptly.

If you notice yourself becoming sad and restless after several weeks in the United States, you might take steps to meet friends and join some student groups on campus. But if the feeling continues, it would be wise to seek help from the counseling service on campus. By doing so, you can prevent the problem from growing more serious. Students who become depressed may experience
feelings of sadness, loss of energy and interest, difficulty concentrating, sleeplessness, and other symptoms that can interfere with academic success. It is always best to take your physical and emotional symptoms seriously and to respond to them appropriately.

Confidentiality

Under U.S. law, the information you share with medical professionals is confidential. It is illegal for a physician or a nurse to disclose information about your condition or your treatment to someone else without prior consent from you. This rule also applies to mental health practitioners such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. Only in very limited circumstances can information be shared, for example, if you are unconscious and your family must be notified, or if the physician believes that your life or the life of someone else may be in danger. These situations are rare. In general, medical practitioners in the United States do not share any information about their diagnosis or treatment with others. This means that your international adviser, faculty members, friends and family cannot call the health center or the counseling center to receive information about you unless you have given your permission. Many practitioners will not even acknowledge that you have been treated or are under care unless you authorize them to do so. Confidentiality is an important protection for patients because those who need medical or psychological care will not have to worry that their personal information will be shared with anyone else.

When you arrive at the clinic, you will be asked to complete forms and to show your insurance card. Read the forms carefully. They may include a section for you to sign that gives permission for the clinic to release your medical records to your insurance company. If you do not wish to sign the type of form, the clinic will not be able to file an insurance claim and you may be required to pay in full for the services you receive.

Seeking Health Care in the United States

Learn about the student health center and the counseling service on your campus. Most campuses have physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, and counselors who provide excellent services for students at a very low cost. If you are eligible to use the on-campus services, they will probably be the best place to seek health care when you need it.

▶ Make sure you know where the student health center is located, and when they are open.

▶ Find out what services they provide and whether you need an appointment in advance or can “walk in” (come without an appointment).

▶ Learn what to do in an emergency if the student health center is closed.

▶ Your student health center may have a pharmacist on staff. Learn what prescriptions they fill and ask where you should go for medicines they do not provide.

▶ You may be able to see certain specialists at your student health center. Examples of specialists include dermatologists (skin),
gastroenterologists (stomach and intestines), gynecologists (women’s reproductive health), registered dieticians (eating habits), orthopedists (bones), and physical therapists (recovery from injuries that restrict body movement). If you need to see a specialist, the staff at your campus health center can schedule an appointment or refer you to an appropriate practitioner.

- Your student health center may have a 24-hour emergency telephone number to call if you have a question when the center is closed. Make sure you keep that number where you can easily find it, and enter it into the directory of your cell phone.

- Health educators provide information and education about a variety of health-related topics. Most student health centers offer health education services, a good way to learn more about staying healthy in the United States.

Learn where to go for services that are not provided on campus. Campus health centers do not typically provide a full range of health services to anyone who requests care. If you, or your dependents, are not eligible to use your campus health center, or if you need a service not provided on campus, you will need to identify a place off campus that offers the care you need.

- Dial “911” for emergencies. Across the United States, “911” is the universal emergency number. By dialing that number, you can summon police, fire fighters, rescue personnel and ambulance.

- Hospitals provide a wide range of medical services, depending on their size and location. Most hospitals include an “emergency room,” where patients who need immediate treatment for urgent problems can be seen. Patients visit emergency rooms for treatment of serious injuries (such as burns, falls, and automobile accidents) or sudden symptoms (such as heart attacks, strokes, and seizures). Learn what hospitals are close to your home and school in case you need emergency medical care that cannot be provided on campus.

- Some campus health centers provide services only for registered students. Others provide care for scholars, faculty and dependents. If you, or your family, are not eligible to use the campus health center, ask for a referral to a physician in the local community so you will know whom to call if you need to see a doctor.

- Consider using an urgent care center for after-hours medical needs. These are clinics, typically located conveniently in local communities and staffed by physicians and nurse practitioners. Unlike many physicians’ clinics, you can walk in to an urgent care center without an appointment, even if you have never been there before. Many urgent care clinics have extended scheduling; for example, they may be open until 10 or 11 in the evening, or even on a 24-hour basis. They are usually open on weekends and holidays. Learn whether there is an urgent care center located near your school or home, and keep the information readily available.
If you have children, it is best to find a pediatrician when you first arrive and schedule an appointment right away so you will be able to see a doctor promptly if your child becomes ill.

If you need to see a physician or specialist off-campus, the student health center can probably help you find someone convenient to your school or home.

In the United States, it is common to receive health care and treatment from many types of health care providers. In some countries, only physicians provide treatment and dispense medication. In the United States, you may receive care from a nurse, or a “nurse practitioner”—a nurse with special advanced training that enables her or him to provide treatment of certain conditions just as a physician would.

In addition, for some questions, a physician would not be the best person to help you. If you have questions about what to eat, either because of a medical problem or because American food is unfamiliar to you, a registered dietician or a nutritionist can help you. If you have questions about medication, a pharmacist is trained to provide answers. For questions about alcohol and other drugs, sexual and reproductive health, and healthy behaviors, a health educator is an excellent resource. Check with your student health center to learn about the resources available on your campus.

For minor problems, you may be able to purchase remedies at a pharmacy. Aspirin, cold medicine, cough medicine, bandages, condoms, first aid creams, and many other remedies are sold at pharmacies. Such items are called “OTC,” meaning “over the counter,” because
Registered pharmacists are highly trained to provide assistance with OTC medications and medical supplies, and they are required by law to offer assistance to patients who have questions about their prescription medication as well. If you need help selecting a remedy at a pharmacy, or if you have questions about any prescription or OTC product you purchase, ask to speak with the pharmacist.

Know when to use a hospital emergency room, and learn which hospitals are nearby. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether a problem is serious enough to be considered an emergency. Some symptoms of emergencies include:

- loss of consciousness
- difficulty in breathing
- severe chest pain
- sudden weakness on one side of the body
- sudden severe headache
- bleeding which does not stop
- vomiting or coughing blood, or vomiting that does not stop
- serious injury, such as a broken limb or a head injury
- sudden and unexplained confusion, sleepiness, or slurred speech
- poisoning (call the Poison Control Center first)
- a severe allergic reaction (for example, to an insect bite or after eating certain foods) that causes difficulty breathing or other serious symptoms, or if they worsen
- suicidal feelings.

Do not use the hospital emergency room for routine medical care. They serve patients based on the urgency of their problems. If you go to an emergency room with a routine problem, such as a sore throat or a minor injury, you will probably have to wait many hours while people who are very ill or seriously injured are treated first. In addition, emergency rooms charge very high rates for service. You will pay much more to see a doctor in an emergency room than at an urgent care center. Many insurance policies assess an additional charge that you must pay yourself if you go to an emergency room for routine medical treatment. Finally, emergency rooms do not provide a pleasant, calming environment. Especially for children, waiting in an emergency room can be troubling and even traumatic. If you do have a genuine emergency, then you should go immediately to a hospital emergency room; if not, there is a better option on campus or in your local community.

Call the Poison Control Center if someone in your home may have swallowed poison or taken an overdose of any drug. Call 1-800-222-1222 to speak directly to someone at one of the Poison Control Centers located throughout the United States. Keep the number near every telephone in your home, and enter it into the directory of your cell phone.