



Heading for College with Special Health Care Needs; Student Preparation for a Successful Transition

Adapted from [Boston Children's Hospital's pediatric health blog](#) on August 17, 2011 as written by Kitty O'Hare, MD, coordinator of Transition Medicine at [Boston Children's Hospital's Martha Eliot Health Center](#)

HEADING OFF TO COLLEGE WHEN YOU HAVE A CHRONIC DISEASE

It's late summer and the back-to-school sales dominate the stores. In my office "back to school" means there is a sudden flurry of activity from students hurrying to get sports physicals and vaccines before heading off to college. Everyone is nervous about their new roommates, their class schedules and whether they will be homesick. But for some patients, going to college is especially nerve-wracking because it will be their first time living away from home with a chronic disease.

Kitty O'Hare, MD, coordinator of Transition Medicine at Boston Children's Hospital's Martha Eliot Health Center

College as a First Stage of Adulthood

Pediatricians, like Dr. O'Hare, care for a lot of adolescents and young adults with chronic disease, everything from asthma to diabetes to congenital heart defects. Dr. O'Hare offers her perspective on how physicians can help to prepare their college bound patients for a health care transition:

"As my patients grow up they have a lot to deal with because of medical issues: taking medicine, extra doctors' appointments, extra vaccinations, missing school (or fun stuff). Most of them have help and support from their family and friends. And they know that their primary care doctor (me) is available to support them."

"But when they leave for college their support network stays at home, and that can be scary. Sometimes they even have to change primary care doctors. They have to think about how their choices in college affect their health, like if they start smoking with friends at parties, will their asthma get worse? As pediatricians, we try to prepare our patients far in advance for the transition to this first stage of adulthood."

Got Transition, The National Health Care Transition Center, is a resource for health care professionals, families, youth, and state policy makers focusing on a young adult's transition from pediatric to adult health care.



In preparation for transition to college life : Dr. O'Hare's top 10 health tips

1. **Know some basics about your disease.** Read about it on the internet – WebMD or Children's Hospital Boston's website is a good place to start. Be able to give its proper name and some basic information about the disease.
2. **Know what medicines you take and why you take them.** Know how to get refills when the medicines run out.
3. **Know if you are allergic to anything** (and exactly what happens to you when you take it.)
4. **Ask your doctor for a written summary of your health conditions.** Ideally this should be a easy-to-read, one-page typed document that you can carry with you. Having an electronic version is also a good idea—keep it on a flash drive for easy transport.
5. **Talk to your pediatrician about when you should start seeing an adult doctor.** If it's time, ask for the names of some good ones—and call for a new patient appointment early as there can sometimes be a wait for appointments. Do this for your primary care doctor and for all of your specialists.
6. **Exercise, exercise, exercise.** Exercise one of the most important things anyone can do for their health.
7. **Try to eat a balanced diet.** As tempting as it is to survive on pizza and beer every day, when you need a snack, grab a piece of fruit and drink low-fat milk. If you have a disease where diet is really important, like diabetes, take time out for regular meals.
8. **Get plenty of sleep** (at least 7 hours every night) and try to stick to a regular sleep schedule.
9. **When you get to campus, make an appointment with student health just to get acquainted.** Ask them about campus resources for students with chronic disease.
10. **Be prepared for emergencies.** Let your roommate, friends, and resident advisor know who to call if you get sick. If you have a serious disease, think about wearing a medical alert bracelet.

Three essential health habits a young person can form in college and keep for a lifetime!

1. *Being physically active;*
2. *Eating well balanced meals;*
3. *Getting enough sleep.*

PACKING FOR COLLEGE: DON'T FORGET YOUR PORTABLE MEDICAL SUMMARY

A [Medical Summary](#) is a one-page document to be "taken with you", to include:

- All current medical information for the patient and their family
- Key clinicians involved in care including specialists and their contact information
- Any medications and treatments and any other critical interventions
- [Emergency Plan](#) - explicit instructions for prepared actions to be taken during urgent or emergent events. (You may wish to make this a separate document to share with your roommate, resident assistant or student health center.)

GOT TRANSITION – OPENING DOORS TO A HEALTHY FUTURE

Planning: Putting Best Foot Forward Toward a Healthy Adult Life

Check it out!

[College Preparation for Students with Disabilities Handbook](#)

by Alabama AHEAD
(Association on Higher Education and Disability)

Dr. O'Hare reminds us about the importance of transition preparation and planning.

"Heading off to college is really exciting, but like all life transitions, it can be scary. The best way to deal with that fear is to be as prepared as possible. By making sure you have the right tools and have done enough planning for your healthcare, you're putting your best foot forward towards a healthy adult life."

"As I tell my patients, you are the expert about your health and your body. As you achieve new levels of independence in your personal life, the same should be said for managing your healthcare."

"College is a place where many of us form habits that we keep for life. By making a conscious effort to take control of your health in this transitional time you are not only making a strong commitment to your current teen health, but to your future health as well."



Resources

RESOURCES FOR MORE ON COLLEGE AND HEALTH CARE TRANSITIONS

- [Got Transition Webinar: Heading for College with Special Health Care Needs; Student Preparation for a Successful Transition](#)
- [Radio Show 2: Health Care Transition and College: - It Doesn't Have to be Learned the Hard Way!](#)
- [Radio Show 3: Health Care Transitions: College and Beyond](#)
- [In this video](#), Jeff is a college student with a physical disability who explores the process of transition from pediatric to adult oriented health care and the influences that have contributed to his success.
- Teens Health, published by Nemours Foundation, offers a number of great [health tips for college-bound teens](#).
- Connecticut Kids as Self Advocates developed this guide, [Moving into Adult Health Care](#), for young adults with or without special health care needs.
- [Think College](#) provides resources and tools for individuals with intellectual disabilities who are thinking about or planning to attend college.
- [College Preparation for Students with Disabilities Handbook](#) by Alabama AHEAD (Association on Higher Education and Disability)
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Washington, DC; [Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities](#)
- PACER Center: [ADA Q & A: Section 504 & Postsecondary Education](#)