

TOP THINGS TO KNOW

COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH CONGENITAL HEART DISEASE

A congenital heart defect (CHD) is a lifelong condition. While a CHD is never “cured,” there are plenty of opportunities to thrive in college with the disease if you remain healthy and stay in medical care. Here are some tips to help your move to college with a CHD.



Get Prepared

- Knowing your congenital heart history is the first step. Your health history includes past surgeries and/or catheterization procedures that you had even as a baby.
- Make an appointment to see your cardiologist at least 6 months before you leave for college. Also, make sure all necessary tests have been done (electrocardiogram, echocardiogram, rhythm monitor, pacemaker check, etc.).
- While you're with your cardiologist, get copies of your electrocardiogram, echocardiogram and other imaging tests to take with you to college.
- Identify the nearest adult congenital cardiologist to your college. This can be discussed with your hometown cardiologist or by looking at the Adult Congenital Heart Disease Clinic Directory (<https://www.achaheart.org/your-heart/clinic-directory/>).
- Consider how campus residential and campus disability services can help you. For example, if your dorm doesn't have an elevator, residential services can help get you a room on a lower level. Do you need more time on exams? The campus disability services office can help with that, too.



Arriving at College

- Contact your student health clinic. Introduce yourself and explain your condition so they are prepared to provide care to you while you're away at school. Give them a copy of your health record. Also, identify a nearby pharmacy so medications can be easily refilled. Suddenly stopping medications can have serious health consequences.
- During college, you'll meet lots of new people and make new friends. Your condition is only one piece of who you are, but it needs to be acknowledged. Telling your resident assistant (RA), roommates and close friends about your CHD can help ensure that they will be prepared to support you if anything happens. Wearing a medical ID bracelet and keeping medical ID information on your iPhone or Android app in case of emergency are musts.
- If you have a pacemaker or a defibrillator, keeping up with regular remote checks is important. Also, be sure your RA and roommates know the location of the closest AED device and how to use it.
- Consider seeking out campus CHD support groups. Not only can you make new friends, but they may be able to direct you to services and people on campus if you run into issues.
- This may be the first time you're on your own. That's exciting! There will be chances to drink and smoke but consider how alcohol and other substances may trigger complications with your CHD. Alcohol, tobacco and marijuana may cause irregular heart rhythms and other cardiac complications.
- That all-nighter may sound like a good idea but think carefully before you drink any caffeine, particularly if you're prone to arrhythmias. Energy drinks also contain large amounts of caffeine and are best avoided.
- Don't ignore new or worsening symptoms, including fevers and chills. Usually, earlier diagnosis and treatment are best.
- College is an exciting opportunity to spread your wings, learn new things and meet new people. Educating yourself about your condition, taking steps to stay in care and managing your condition are important ways to make the most of all the opportunities you encounter in college and beyond.