

Kinsey Ehmann
kinsey.ehmann@pepperdine.edu
408-621-6568
ShapeThatBod.com Scholarship
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Balancing Studies and Health for College Students

Classes. Dorm activities. Friends. Laundry. Oh — and sleep, too! In trying to juggle all the demands of a busy college student's life, the thing that's often dropped by the wayside is taking care of your health. But what a lot of young people don't understand is that by making your physical health a priority, you'll actually be able to get more done, be more productive, and feel better doing it.

As an NCAA Division 1 college student-athlete, I have an advantage when it comes to fitting workouts into my schedule. I don't have a choice; I'm expected in the weight room and on the soccer field every day, and if I don't come prepared to feel and perform my best, I'm letting my team down. The NCAA limits in-season practice time to 20 hours per week, and we make use of each and every one of those hours.

We're also expected to maintain our grades and get enough sleep so we can perform at an elite level. Keeping fit and preparing for my sport, soccer, is basically a full-time job on top of my full-time job as a student. So when other college students tell me they don't "have time" to fit in a quick run or a workout, I have to laugh. The time is there; you just have to make it a priority.

Over the past years, I've learned some tricks for fitting healthy habits into my life. While you may never have to run wind sprints at 6 AM on a Saturday morning, these tips will help you balance your academic studies and your health:

1. **Get enough sleep.** There is always something going on in the dorms. If you want to find someone to make a run to In'N'Out Burger at midnight or watch NetFlix until 2 AM, all you have to do is poke your head outside your door and yell down the hall. It can be tempting to try to do it all. It's definitely part of the college experience to push the boundaries on your bedtime, but don't make it a regular habit. Lack of sleep is linked to illness, poor performance in the classroom, weight gain, and even [mental health issues like depression and anxiety](#). Get your 8-9 hours on average and you'll feel and look better.
2. **Do double-duty.** A huge part of college life is social. You can and should be meeting new people and trying new things, and you can weave fitness into that. Join a pick-up Ultimate Frisbee game, go for a hike with a friend, or play on an intramural basketball team. Not only will it be easier to fit exercise into your schedule, you'll also have the opportunity to make friends at the same time. An added benefit: [Research published in](#)

[*Nature Communications Journal*](#) shows that when you work out with a buddy, you're likely to work out harder and longer. I know that when I'm running with my teammates, I'm much more motivated to push myself, which in turn pushes them. It's a win-win!

3. **Make a commitment.** Telling yourself you're going to go to the gym this week isn't the same as committing to doing so. For a commitment to be successful, it must be backed up with a specific plan. Instead of saying, "I should work out more," say, "I'm going to go for a run every Tuesday and Thursday at 4 PM after my last class." Having a concrete plan in mind makes it more likely you'll actually follow through. If you're not good at making those kinds of commitments on your own, create an external structure to help you. Find a workout partner, or sign up for a class. Virtually every college offers sports classes from golf to yoga, sometimes even for credit. Student-athletes have very specific schedules we must follow, even over the summer. This planning means the workouts take place, no matter what.

4. **Break it up.** When you think about your day, it can be tough to find an hour to go to a kickboxing class, 15 minutes to stretch, and another 30 minutes to take a shower afterwards. That's why I like to break up my workouts when possible. You can do the same by following along with a yoga video for 15 minutes in the morning, and then riding your bike to and from class to get in some cardio. You don't have to do it all at once. Breaking it up in smaller chunks makes it easier to find spots in your schedule to work in an exercise break here and there.

5. **Eat right.** There are so many competing philosophies out there, it can be tough to know which to follow! Should you go vegan or Paleo? Eat high protein/low fat or low protein/high fat? Should you ban gluten? What about carbs? Experts can't seem to agree. But what everyone does agree on is the fact that vegetables are good for you, and the fewer chemicals in your food, and the less processed it is, the better off you'll be. When you're eating from a cafeteria, you may not have all the choices you'd like, but you can still start each meal with a salad and stay away from sodas and other high-calorie drinks. Other than that, test it out. Do you feel better or worse after you eat dairy? Does a big plate of spaghetti make you feel sluggish or energized? Everyone is different, and what works for the football player across the hall may not work for you. I've seen really healthy teammates who don't ever eat beef or chicken, while other ones make red meat a part of every meal. Eating right is my biggest challenge because I'm burning so many calories, I can get away with eating "junk." But I know to feel my best, I have to fuel my body. I'm getting better about avoiding the ice cream, except for a once-in-a-while treat!

The great thing about making your health and fitness part of your life is that it will help you perform your best. You'll feel better and be more productive. You'll be able to focus in class and when you study, and you'll even out the energy valleys that can hit in the middle of the afternoon. You'll get sick less, too! As a result, the hour you spend at the gym a few times a week will pay off in more time for everything else, including for studies and for fun!