



Backpack Misuse Leads to Chronic Back Pain

Back pain is pervasive among American adults, but a new and disturbing trend is emerging. Young children are suffering from back pain much earlier than previous generations, and the use of overweight backpacks is a contributing factor, according to leading health care providers. In fact, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports that backpack-related injuries sent more than 7,000 people to the emergency room in 2001 alone.

This new back pain trend among youngsters isn't surprising when you consider the disproportionate amounts of weight they carry in their backpacks - often slung over just one shoulder. A recent study conducted in Italy found that the average child carries a backpack that would be the equivalent of a 39-pound burden for a 176-pound man, or a 29-pound load for a 132-pound woman. Of those children carrying heavy backpacks to school, 60 percent had experienced back pain as a result.

What Can You Do?

The following is a checklist to help parents select the best possible backpack for their children:

Is the backpack the correct size for your child? The backpack should never be wider or longer than your child's torso, and the pack should not hang more than 4 inches below the waistline. A backpack that hangs too low increases the weight on the shoulders, causing your child to lean forward when walking.

Does the backpack have two wide, padded shoulder straps? Non-padded straps are not only uncomfortable, but also they can place unnecessary pressure on the neck and shoulder muscles.

Does your child use both straps? Lugging a heavy backpack by one strap can cause a disproportionate shift of weight to one side, leading to neck and muscle spasms, low-back pain, and poor posture.

Are the shoulder straps adjustable? The shoulder straps should be adjustable so the backpack can be fitted to your child's body. The backpack should be evenly centered in the middle of your child's back.

Does the backpack have a padded back? A padded back not only provides increased comfort, but also protects your child from being poked by sharp edges on school supplies (pencils, rulers, notebooks, etc.) inside the pack.

Does the pack have several compartments? A backpack with individualized compartments helps position the contents most effectively. Make sure that pointy or bulky objects are packed away from the area that will rest on your child's back, and try to place the heaviest items closest to the body.

It is recommended that parents or guardians help children pack their backpacks properly, and they should make sure children never carry more than 10 percent of their body weight. For example, a child who weighs 100 pounds shouldn't carry a backpack heavier than 10 pounds, and a 50-pound child shouldn't carry more than 5 pounds. In addition, parents should ask their children to report any pain or other problems resulting from carrying a backpack. If the pain is moderate to severe or persistent, seek care from a health care professional.