

Backpack Tips

by Michael P. Friedman, D.C.

As September approaches, parents and children are preparing for the chaotic annual ritual of back to school shopping. Along with the latest fashions and newest technology, backpacks are one of the most popular purchases at this time of year. But how many parents consider safety over fashion when selecting a pack for their children's school supplies? Although these packs are less detrimental when compared to shoulder bags and purses, they do not always ensure that schoolchildren can carry their supplies around without sustaining some type of injury.

As children are required to cart around more and heavier textbooks, along gym clothes, game boys, and other important school necessities, a greater strain is being placed on their young and developing spines. Far too often, this burden is too much for them to bear, as health care professionals from chiropractors to orthopedists are seeing an alarming increase in injuries due to backpacks. In addition, the U.S. consumer Product Safety Commission, has reported a 330 percent rise in emergency room visits due to backpack related injuries since 1996. These injuries include strains of the neck, back and shoulder, as well as those suffered from either tripping over or getting hit by a backpack. One important limitation to the report, is that it does not include chronic, repetitive strain injuries that might not require a trip to the emergency room. Another important fact is that injuries to the spine can be a factor in the development of several common childhood conditions such as asthma and other breathing difficulties, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other learning disabilities, bed wetting and many more.

To help ensure that your kids have a healthy spine and properly functioning nervous system, have them checked by a chiropractor and follow these simple steps to ensure proper backpack safety:

Select the right pack - Choosing the right backpack can go a long way to protecting your child's spine. Make sure that someone is there to help them measure the size properly. The pack should not be greater than 75% of the length of their back and no wider than the child's torso. A good reference measure is from the space between the shoulder blades to the waist. The pack should have a padded back and two fairly wide and firm shoulder straps. Thinner straps can dig into the shoulders and impede circulation and interfere with the nervous system. Another option is to opt for a backpack on wheels.

Pack right - Start with the heavier items, making sure that they are closest to the spine and load only what is needed for the day, with no unnecessary items. The total weight of the pack should not exceed 15 per cent of your child's weight. If he or she has to lean forward in order to carry it, the pack is too heavy.

Lift right - Proper lifting technique can help prevent injury. Start out facing the pack and as when lifting any heavy weight, your child should bend at the knees and lift with the legs holding the straps in both hands. Put on the pack one shoulder strap at a time to avoid slinging the pack onto the back and possibly injuring someone else.

Wear it right - Make sure your child wears both shoulder straps at all times to avoid increased pressure on one side of the body. Newer bags that only have one strap to sling across the chest lead to muscle imbalances, as the wearer tends to lean to one side to compensate for the extra weight. The straps should be secure, but not too tight. If the bag has a waist strap, use it to spread the weight more evenly throughout the body.

Some more tips to prevent injury include:

- Using a bag with multiple compartments to help distribute the weight within the bag.
- Do not swing the backpack. It could not only injure the wearer, but those around him as well.
- Keeping the floors and walkways clear of backpacks can prevent someone else from tripping over them.

- Keep pencils and other sharp objects out of the main compartment. Most packs have a separate and safe area in which to store these items.
- Keep a second set of textbooks at home or use books on CD ROM
- Encourage your children to stop at their lockers often throughout the day.
- Strengthen the core stabilizing muscles, including those in the lower back and abdominals.
- Finally, regular chiropractic checkups can ensure your child has a properly functioning nervous system and the correct spinal biomechanics to help their bodies cope with the stresses of lugging around a heavy pack all day and prevent serious injuries to the back.