[IMAGE]

The Backpack Dilemma

How Heavy Is Too Heavy?

By Dr. Claudia Anrig

Chiropractors, pediatricians and orthopedic surgeons all agree that backpacks are a problem for a child's spine. While a backpack alone may not cause major problems, overloading and improper carrying of a backpack can lead to headaches, neck, shoulder and lower back pain.

According to an article published in the medical journal *Spine,* "Of the 1,122 backpack users, 74% were classified as having back pain, validated by significantly poorer general health, more limited physical function, and more bodily pain."

How Heavy Is Too Heavy?

While health care professionals do not agree on the exact weight, the consensus is that a child burdened with more than 10 percent of their body weight risks back and neck pain; and the majority of health care professionals agree that a child carrying more than 15 percent or more of their body weight can suffer from severe back, neck and shoulder pain, headaches, and other spinal discomfort; not to mention aggravate pre-existing spinal conditions such as scoliosis.

Backpack stuffed full of school supplies in classroom. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark How heavy is too heavy? A 60-pound child should be limited to carrying no more than 9 pounds; the 80-pound child, about 12 pounds; and the 100-pound child, no more than 15 pounds.

Time to Lighten the Load

It's important to weigh your child's backpack at least once a week. If it exceeds the "15 percent rule" of your child's weight, think of ways to "lighten the load." A backpack stuffed with that "extra" book, binder, electronic device or water bottle easily can add an unnecessary 10 pounds.

Parents need to show their children the importance of loading and carrying their backpacks appropriately. The heaviest items should rest against the back, which means loading them first and attempting to distribute

the weight evenly.

While children may think nothing of carrying their backpack slung over one shoulder, the truth is that this fashion statement is damaging to the developing spine. When carrying a pack on one side only, one shoulder is required to carry a burden that both shoulders and the back should be sharing equally. The only proper way to carry a backpack is with both straps over the shoulders and the backpack resting against the lower back.

Function vs. Fashion

The first priority in purchasing a backpack is to select function over fashion. This recommendation may be easier said than done, but it’s an important one. Years of wearing a backpack in the "fashionable" way will undoubtedly lead to improper spinal alignment, poor posture, and eventually pain, for your children.

Here are a few criteria to consider when choosing a safer, more functional backpack for your children:

Young girl and a heavy backpack standing on respective doctor’s scales. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The general consensus is that a backpack exceeding 10 percent to 15 percent of a childs body weight can inflict physical damage over time.

1. The backpack should fit properly (not too long or too short).
2. It should have wide, padded, adjustable straps (for proper positioning on the shoulders and back).
3. A backpack with a hip strap or lumbar pillow provides additional protection. The hip strap, when used, can distribute a portion of the weight to the hips, easing the load on the spine and shoulders. The use of a lumbar pillow will provide the necessary back support to the lumbar region, where the greatest portion of weight is being carried.

The bottom line: When shopping for a backpack, consider that the more support features on the backpack, the less spinal stress your child will carry.

Think Twice About Roller Bags

Are roller bags the solution? Although one might think a roller bag would be the answer to the problem - by taking weight off your child’s spine and shoulders - it should be noted that an empty roller bag may weigh up to 80 percent more than an empty backpack. Furthermore, these bags run larger, inviting your child to

overload the extra space as much as 50 pounds. Although these bags will be rolled, don't forget that a child (and their developing spine) is still at risk when lifting the bag up or down stairs, or retrieving it from the back seat of the car.

So remember, with the current school year coming to a close and a new one just months away, remember that when it comes to choosing a backpack, think function before fashion. Your child's health depends on it.

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