

Is Your Child's Backpack Safe?

By Julie Johnson, D.C., Director of Community Relations, Palmer Chiropractic Clinics, Davenport, Iowa.

With back-to-school time nearly upon us, it's important to think about all of those heavy books our kids haul to and from school every day. Backpack safety may not be an issue that's top-of-mind with parents, but the truth of the matter is that heavy backpacks may have a destructive impact on the posture and spinal health of children—possibly causing injuries with effects that may last a lifetime. The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that 7,277 emergency room visits each year result from injuries related to book bags.

DO A BACKPACK CHECK

If you have any doubts, ask your child to load his/her book bag with the items normally carried and step on the bathroom scale. You may be surprised at what you discover. Many children and teens carry up to 40 pounds of weight in an average backpack for much of the school day, plus traveling to and from school.

RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES

According to the University of Michigan, up to 60 percent of children will experience back pain by the time they reach 18 years of age because they often carry 55 percent more than the national recommended guidelines for backpack weight of only 10 to 15 percent of the child's body weight. For example, a child weighing 50 pounds should carry no more than five to seven-and-a-half pounds of backpack weight.

Ask your child to answer the following questions:

- > Do your fingers tingle?
- > Do your shoulders hurt?
- > Do you have pain in your low back?
- > Do you have neck discomfort?
- > Is your back or neck tired at the end of the day?
- > Do your mother/father say, "How can you carry this, it's much too heavy?"

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," here are some things you can do.

DISTRIBUTE THE LOAD

Although backpacks will continue to be a mainstay for children, backpack injuries don't have to be. A team led by the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine found that the way the load is distributed under the backpack straps may help to locate the source of shoulder and back pain in children

and teens. In addition to reducing the load of the pack to a more reasonable weight, the pack should also be carried over both shoulders instead of on only one.

PURCHASE AN ERGONOMIC BACKPACK

A proper backpack also is critically important. Ergonomic backpacks have a lumbar cushion and padded shoulder straps to distribute the weight of the pack properly and lighten the effective weight load of the pack on the frame of the child. One effective pack that I've seen is the AirPacks Ergonomic Backpack. It comes in a variety of sizes and uses a patented technology to help prevent back injury.

GET REGULAR CHIROPRACTIC CARE

And finally, if your child carries a heavy backpack and complains of back, shoulder or neck pain, take him or her to a chiropractor for a thorough spinal and muscular system evaluation. Repetitive improper use of a backpack can cause muscular imbalance, postural changes and subsequent nervous system dysfunction. Evaluating your child's backpack safety and taking preventive measures if appropriate is one more healthy option you can choose that may make a difference for a lifetime.