

Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

Backpacks Can Cause Injury If Not Properly Used

I am amazed at the amount of books and other supplies kids have to carry with them to and from school. Backpacks of course were designed to help carry these items. Unfortunately, excessive weight and/or improperly or incorrectly used backpacks can cause injury to children and teenagers. I have seen children complain of severe back, neck and shoulder pain as a result of carrying a very heavy backpack. Posture problems can also arise from improper use of backpacks. This is why the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued guidelines on the proper use and selection of backpacks.

Before I discuss these guidelines, let me review some common sense approaches parents can take:

- Parents should ask their kids to report any pain or other problem resulting from carrying a backpack. If the pain is severe or persistent, get it checked out by your doctor.
- Try to limit the weight of the load. This may be achieved by talking to your child's school. Also, try to pack objects/books that are only absolutely necessary.
- Perhaps the students can be allowed to stop at their lockers through the day instead of having to carry all of their books to all classes.
- Some textbooks need not be transported back and forth from home to school all the time.

How much weight is too much?

As a general rule, the backpack should never weigh more than 10 to 20% of the student's body weight. So, as an example, for a 70 lb. child, anything over 14 lbs. is too heavy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following when choosing and using a backpack:

- Choose backpacks with wide, padded shoulder straps. Narrow straps can dig into shoulders resulting in pain and restricted circulation.
- The backpack should have a padded back, which protects against sharp edges on objects inside the pack and increases comfort.
- Always use both shoulder straps. Carrying a backpack over one shoulder can strain muscles and may increase curvature of the spine. Also backpacks with an extra strap that wrap around the waist offer better support.
- Organize the backpack to use all of its compartments. Pack heavier items closest to the center of the back.
- Use a rolling backpack (on wheels). This type of backpack may be a good choice for students who must carry a heavy load. Remember that rolling backpacks still must be carried upstairs. Also, they may be difficult to roll in snow.

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