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## BACKPACK BASICS -



### A backpack safety lesson

Maybe you've made this famous statement to your kids, "A little homework won't hurt you!" That's true, but the amount of books and gear toted by students today sure might! Lugging an overloaded, lopsided backpack can cause neck, shoulder and back pain, even posture problems that could nag children and teenagers now and later in life. Teach your kids to use backpacks safely by following these tips:

#### Choose wisely

Select a LIGHTWEIGHT backpack with TWO wide, padded, adjustable shoulder straps and a padded back. Non-padded straps are uncomfortable and can place unnecessary pressure on the neck and shoulder muscles. A padded back also protects your child from being poked by sharp edges on school supplies (pencils, rulers, notebooks, etc.) inside the pack. In addition, look for backpacks that have several compartments to help distribute the load.

#### Check the fit

Be sure your child's back pack is the correct size. It should be no wider or longer than your child's torso. The torso extends from the base of the neck down to the top of the hips, 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. 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.

#### Pack it up

Never overload a backpack. Kids should carry no more weight in their backpacks than what they can carry comfortably in their arms for a few minutes. The maximum weight of a loaded backpack should be no more than 10% to 15% of your child's body weight. For example, an 80-pound child should not carry more than 12 pounds in a pack. Only pack ESSENTIALS. Use ALL of those compartments to distribute the weight and pack heavier items closest to the center of the back. Stow anything that could poke through the pack, such as scissors, in a protective container. Be sure to include emergency contact information inside.

### Putting on the pack

Face the backpack and bend at the knees. Use both hands and test the weight of the pack before attempting to lift it. When you lift, lift with your legs. Slip into one shoulder strap, then the other. NEVER carry a backpack on one shoulder. 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. The backpack should be centered in the middle of the child's back. The straps should be snug, but not excessively tight. Your child should be able to walk normally with the backpack on - erect, with shoulders down and back. If the pack forces them to lean forward, it's overloaded. Roller backpacks may result in forward head and thoracic deviations just as severe as children carrying excessively heavy backpacks. Though the load of the backpack is no longer on the skeletal structure, dragging the backpack may result in rotary forces on the spine through the involved arm. Waist belts may cause excessive force across a growing pelvis leading to possible pelvic abnormalities.

### Ask for Backpack Relief

Talk to school officials and teachers about lightening the load. If possible, students should be allowed to visit their lockers several times a day to drop off and pick up books. Heavier textbooks might be left at school and only lightweight workbooks and handouts taken home. Team up with other concerned parents to encourage changes at the school or consider purchasing a second set of textbooks for your child to use at home.

### Talk, talk, talk

Talk to your child about the proper use of backpacks to help them understand the importance of taking care of their health. Lessons learned about taking care of themselves now will serve them well during their entire life. Urge your kids to let you know about any pain or discomfort caused by wearing their backpacks.

### Chiropractic to the rescue

Don't ignore any complaints of pain from your children. Ask your doctor of chiropractic for advice on assessing any adverse affects of your child's backpack use. He/she may recommend back-strengthening exercises, instruction in improving posture, or better sleeping and eating habits. Doctors of chiropractic are licensed and extensively trained to diagnose and treat people of all ages, using a gentler type of treatment for children.