

For Your Health

Improper Use of Backpacks Leads to Chronic Back Pain

Backpacks have made it easy for many Americans to throw in everything but the kitchen sink without realizing they could be throwing out their backs. Millions of students are racing to the school bus or scurrying to their classes with overstuffed backpacks slung over one shoulder. At the same time, more adults have opted for lugging a backpack, rather than a briefcase, to and from the office. While carrying a backpack might seem harmless enough, it can cause some painful back and neck problems for people who don't pack or carry their backpacks properly.



Similarly, a recent study conducted in Italy found that the average child carries a backpack that would be the equivalent of a 39-pound backpack for a 176-pound man, or a 29-pound backpack for a 132-pound woman.

What Can You Do?

The American Chiropractic Association offers the following tips to parents to help prevent the needless pain that backpack misuse could cause the students in your household. (And, now that backpacks have begun replacing briefcases in the work place, you, too, might want to follow this advice):

Back pain is pervasive in our society. Eighty percent of all Americans will suffer from it at some point in their lives, and 50 percent of us will suffer from low-back pain this year alone. Much of this suffering is brought on by bad habits initiated during our younger years—such as carrying overweight backpacks to school.

A recent survey by Lands' End Direct Merchants found that more than 96 percent of children ages 8 to 12 will carry a backpack to school this year. Of those, nearly one-third will carry their backpack improperly.

- Make sure your child's backpack weighs no more than 5 to 10 percent of his or her body weight. If the backpack is heavier, it will cause your child to begin bending forward in an attempt to support the weight on his or her back, rather than on the shoulders, by the straps.
- The position of the backpack is important. The backpack should never hang more than four inches below the waistline. A backpack that hangs too low increases the weight on the shoulders, causing your child to lean forward when walking.

- A backpack with individualized compartments helps in positioning the contents most effectively. When packing the backpack, make sure that pointed or bulky objects are packed away from the area that will rest on your child's back. An uneven surface rubbing against the back could cause painful blisters.
- Keep in mind that bigger is not necessarily better. Parents should buy the best-designed backpack possible for their child. The more room there is in a backpack, the more your child will carry—and the heavier the backpack will be.
- It is important that your child wear both shoulder straps. Lugging the backpack around by one shoulder strap can cause the disproportionate shift of weight to one side, leading to neck and muscle spasms, as well as low-back pain.
- Padded straps are very important. Non-padded straps are uncomfortable, and can dig into your child's shoulders.
- The shoulder straps should also be adjustable so the backpack can be fitted to your child's body. Shoulder straps that are too loose can cause the backpack to dangle uncomfortably and cause spinal misalignment and pain.
- If the backpack is still too heavy, talk to your child's teacher. It might be possible for your child to leave the heaviest books at school, and bring home only lighter hand-out materials or workbooks.
- If your child continues to complain about back pain, consider an alternative to traditional backpacks—packs on wheels. More parents and children are realizing the benefits of this safer way to transport books and other necessities to and from school.
- Talk to your child about the proper use of backpacks and help him or her understand why this and other ergonomic issues are important. A child who is educated early in life on the importance of ergonomics can apply this knowledge later in life—at home or in the office—and will be happier and healthier as a result.

For the Hiker

- Backpacks are not only a necessity in school, but also important for such outdoor enthusiasts as campers and hikers. When being fitted for a hiking backpack, find a backpack that accommodates your dorsal length—the area from the upper back to the bottom of your ribs—not your total height.

- While hiking, the shoulder straps should be placed in the center of each clavicle, or collarbone. The shoulder straps are for increased stability, not for carrying an increased load. For proper wear and comfort, you should be able to fit two fingers comfortably under the straps.

- Most backpacks designed for hiking are equipped with hip belts. Since most hikers fill their backpacks completely, hip belts are designed to carry the majority of the load for longer periods of time. Be sure the belt is fitted along the area around the hips and above the pelvic bone, where your pants usually ride.

- When packing your hiking backpack, place the heaviest items in the bottom, the lighter items higher and in the pockets. Too much weight at the top of the backpack will result in an off-centered, disproportionate shift of weight, which can result in back pain.

Chiropractic Care Can Help...

If you or your child experiences any pain or discomfort resulting from backpack misuse, call your doctor of chiropractic. Doctors of chiropractic are licensed and trained to diagnose and treat patients of all ages and will use a gentler type of treatment for children. In addition, doctors of chiropractic can also prescribe exercises designed to help children develop strong muscles, along with instruction in good nutrition, posture and sleeping habits.

Chiropractic in Cyberspace...

If you like to surf the Net, check out our Web site. Not only can you find information about numerous health issues, you can also obtain additional information about preventing spinal pain and injury, read important studies about the effectiveness of chiropractic care, and learn about chiropractic education and the history of chiropractic.

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