

Backpack May Spell Backache

by Tamra Orr

It hangs around with you almost every day. It manages to handle whatever you throw into it. It's cool. It's convenient. It's your backpack!

But guess what? The facts are in: Backpacks can be dangerous! Yep, that handy backpack just might be your own personal ticket to lots of back problems in the future.

"We are seeing students in the fourth and fifth grades who are complaining about backaches, fatigue, and (physical) stress," says Russell Windsor, M.D., a surgeon at New York City's Hospital for Special Surgery. Dr. Windsor is an expert in orthopedics (or-tho-PEED-ix; having to do with the prevention or correction of skeletal deformities).

What causes the complaints Dr. Windsor hears from kids? Backpacks that don't fit properly, backpacks that weigh far too much for kids to be carrying safely, and backpacks that are worn with the weight unevenly distributed.

How Much Is Too Much?

How much are kids carrying on their backs? Many of them are carrying more than 25 percent of their overall body weight, and that is just too much. Experts like Dr. Seymour Zimble-Associate in Orthopedic Surgery at the Children's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts-recommend that you carry no more than 15 percent of your total body weight, and preferably less than that. What does all that mean? If you weigh 80 pounds, your backpack should not weigh more than 12 pounds. If you weigh 100 pounds, your backpack should tip the scales at less than 15 pounds. Any more than this will cause a lot of wear and tear on the muscles, joints, and ligaments of your shoulders, neck, and spine. That can mean pain today and real back problems in the future.

"If you have a 90-pound female carrying a 20-pound backpack, then the backpack weight becomes a medical issue," says Dr. Charlotte Alexander, an orthopedic surgeon in Houston. "We found one 10th grade female student with a backpack weighing 47 pounds!"

How much does your backpack weigh? Bring out the bathroom scale and find out. Put all the books you usually carry in it and then put it on the scale. Is it less than 15 percent of your weight? If you're like most kids, the answer is no. Try taking books out one at a time and see how many you can carry at once to keep your backpack at a safe weight. Ask yourself if there is something that you don't have to carry around. Can several items stay in your locker or at home?

If your school allows it, try to make more frequent locker stops so that you don't have to carry books for all your classes at the same time. Some schools allow you to rent two

sets of textbooks so you can have one at home and one at school. Others will only approve this if you have a medical excuse from your physician.

Wearing It Right

The secret to being able to carry your backpack safely isn't just making sure it's light enough. It's also how you wear it. Most kids pick it up and sling it over one shoulder—always the same shoulder. This puts a lot of stress on one side of the body. "Putting that much weight on one side of the body will cause it to bend away from the upright position it should have," says Dr. Joseph Orr, a chiropractor in Warsaw, Indiana. Chiropractors (KI-row-prak-torz) are physicians who maintain that your spine is key to your health.

Stop and look carefully at your backpack. Remember, it has two or three straps, not just one. There's a reason for that. By making sure to use all the straps, you will distribute the weight more evenly, and that will lessen the stress and strain. It may take a little longer to put your pack on, but it's worth the extra effort. And it feels better!

Beyond just wearing all the straps, make sure the pack sits in the middle of your back. This may mean that you have to shorten or lengthen the straps to get it just right. You can make the load even easier to carry by putting the heaviest items closest to your back.

Wearing your pack right includes picking it up properly. Slinging your pack from the floor to your shoulder may be what everyone's doing, but it's really bad for your back. Instead, try these simple steps, recommended by Backpack Safety America, Internet resource established by chiropractor Dr. Marvin Arnsdorff.

- Face your backpack before you lift it.
- Bend at the knees.
- Using both hands, check the weight of the pack.
- Lift with your legs, not your back.
- Carefully put on one shoulder strap at a time.
- Use both shoulder straps and the waist strap.

Pick the Right Pack

Backpack safety begins with selecting the right pack for you. Choose a pack that's sturdy and fits you. When you adjust the straps, the pack should fit snugly in the middle of your back. The right pack also should have padded shoulder straps and a waist strap. The waist strap when it's adjusted to fit snugly, keeps the pack from bouncing around. It also takes some of the pressure off your shoulders. One more tip: Have someone come with you to the store to help you fit your backpack properly. Or you might look into the new "backpack on wheels" called "Roller Backpack." It can be carried as a regular pack or rolled on wheels and pulled by a handle.

Backpacks make keeping track of your books and homework a lot easier. But as convenient as they may be, they can also cause problems. Make sure to lighten your load, carry it evenly, and sit up straight! You only have one back, so take good care of it!