

Oh, My Aching Back! Choosing a backpack

Backpacks are a popular and practical way for children and teens to carry their books and supplies. Backpacks that are too heavy or worn incorrectly, however, can cause severe back, neck, and shoulder pain, as well as posture problems. The guidelines below from the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons¹ can help.



Look for the following when choosing a backpack:

- Wide, padded shoulder straps. Narrow straps can dig into shoulders, which can cause pain and restrict circulation.
- Two shoulder straps. Backpacks with one shoulder strap that runs across the body cannot distribute weight evenly.
- Padded back. A padded back protects against sharp edges from objects inside the pack and increases comfort.
- Waist strap. A waist strap can distribute the weight of a heavy load more evenly.
- Lightweight backpack. The backpack itself should not add much weight to the load.
- Rolling backpack. This type of backpack may be a good choice for students who must tote a heavy load. Remember that rolling backpacks must be carried up stairs.¹

To prevent injury when using a backpack, do the following:

- Always use both shoulder straps. Slinging a backpack over one shoulder can strain muscles.

- Tighten the straps so that the pack is close to the body. The straps should hold the pack two inches above the waist.
- Pack light. The backpack should never weigh more than 20 percent of the student's total body weight.
- Organize the backpack to use all of its compartments. Pack heavier items closest to the center of the back.
- Stop often at school lockers and remove items you don't need, if possible. Do not carry all of the books needed for the day.
- Bend using both knees, when you bend down. Do not bend over at the waist when wearing or lifting a heavy backpack.
- Learn back-strengthening exercises to build up the muscles used to carry a backpack.¹

Finally, don't forget to remind your child to keep backpacks off the floor and refrain from using them to hit each other, which, according to a recent study, could prevent more than 40 percent of backpack-related injuries.²

Sources:

1. American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (2004). Backpack safety [on-line]. Retrieved June 11, 2007. From http://www.orthoinfo.org/fact/thr_report.cfm?Thread_ID=105&topcategory=Children.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics (2003). News from AAP: Acute backpack injuries in children [on-line]. Retrieved June 11, 2007. From http://www.medem.com/search/article_display.cfm?path=\\TANQUERAY\M_ContentItem&mstr=/M_ContentItem/ZZZR8OG5BBD.html&soc=AAP&srch_typ=NAV_SERCH