

Is Your Backpack Causing Back Pain?

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Backpacks allow a person to carry more items than would be possible by the arms and hands alone. However, this places you at risk for overload, which can strain the back, neck, or shoulders. It has been reported that nearly 50% of youths complain of at least one episode of back pain. It appears to be a trend for kids to carry backpacks using only one strap on the shoulder. Kids who wear backpacks on only one shoulder end up altering the way they walk while bent sideways under the weight of an overloaded backpack. A heavy load, distributed unevenly, day after day, is going to cause stress to a growing spinal column. A heavy weight carried on the back can cause a person to lean forward, distort the natural curves in the middle and lower back, and cause a rounding of the shoulders. Habitually carrying a load over one shoulder will make muscles strain to compensate for the uneven weight. The spine leans to the opposite side, stressing the middle back, ribs and lower back more on one side than the other. This type of muscle imbalance can cause muscle strain, muscle spasm, and back pain in the short term and speed the development of back problems later in life if not corrected. The weight can also pull on the neck muscles, contributing to headaches, neck pain, and arm pain.

It has been reported that a typical 80-100 pound child will carry a backpack weighing approximately 30 pounds. It has been recommended to limit backpack weight to 10-15% of the child's body weight. If you do experience pain from carrying a backpack you should try not to carry one for two weeks. If your pain continues seek advice from your physician or physical therapist.

Tips for prevention:

- Make sure your backpack is sturdy and appropriately sized.
- To help distribute the load, look for packs with padded shoulder and waist straps.
- Avoid overloading by prioritizing the items carried and eliminating unnecessary contents.
- Pack by evenly distributing the items throughout the backpack.
- Spread the load by carrying a book or two in your hands.
- Pack heaviest objects first so they are carried low and close to the body.
- Pack sharp and bulky objects so they are not in contact with the back.
- Lift backpack by bending the knees.
- Center the backpack high on your back, not resting low near the buttocks.
- Adjust the straps so the backpack fits snugly to the body and is 2 inches above the waist.
- Use both shoulder straps as well as the waist strap.
- Do not bend forward while walking; if you must do this, the pack is too heavy.
- Practice good posture.
- Stop and stretch if you are required to carry a backpack for more than 20 minutes.
- Use a backpack with wheels you can pull.