

Getting the proper backpack

By TOM SARTOR

As summer quickly comes to an end, both parents and children begin their annual pilgrimage to local stores in search of back to school items. Along with the usual purchases of clothing and footwear, backpacks seem to be endlessly replaced. Choosing the correct backpack can have long-term health benefits to your child. The research journal 'Spine', found more than 50% of youth experience at least one low back pain episode resulting from improper use of back packs.

Heavy backpacks create poor posture by encouraging students to lean forward, reducing their ability to maintain balance and restrict movement. In addition, improperly worn or heavy backpacks can cause rounding of the shoulders leading to headaches and neck pain.

Here are some tips in choosing a backpack:

1. Choose a backpack that is proportionate to body size and not larger than what is needed. The top of the backpack should not extend higher than the top of the shoulder, and the bottom should not fall below the top of the hipbone.

2. Select a backpack made of lightweight material (vinyl or canvas instead of leather).

3. The shoulder straps should be at least two inches wide, adjustable and padded. Ensure that they do not

cut into or fit too snugly around the arms and arm pits. Poorly designed shoulder straps can dig deep into the muscles and put strain on the nerves.

4. A backpack should have a padded back for added protection and comfort.

5. A hip strap or waist belt helps to effectively redistribute as much as 50 to 70% of the weight off the shoulders and spine onto the pelvis, equalizing the strain on the bones, joints and muscles.

6. Choose a backpack that has several individual pockets instead of one large compartment, this will help to distribute the weight evenly and keep contents from shifting.

7. Explore other backpack options such as one with wheels and a pull handle for easy rolling.

A good rule of thumb is that backpacks should never exceed 15% of a secondary student's body weight or 10% of an elementary child's body weight. Heavier items should be placed closest to the body, as this significantly reduces strain on the spine. Homework is inevitable but long-term health risks associated with an overloaded school pack can be easily avoided. Take the time to check your child's backpack, insuring it fits properly and that the weight is evenly distributed. Please "Pack it light and wear it right".

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