

Are backpacks safe for my child to be using?

(By Jeff Hartwell Doctor of Chiropractic)

If you are a parent of a school-aged child, and you have not asked yourself this question, you sure should. According to a recent study conducted by the American Academy of Orthopedics, over 70% of orthopedic doctors feel that carrying a backpack poses a clinical problem for children. There is growing evidence that backpacks may be a threat to spinal development. An Auburn University study reports that nearly 70% of the children it surveyed suffered muscle soreness, 50% experienced back pain, 25% had numbness, and another 15% had shoulder pain from toting backpacks. Scoliosis (sideways curvature of the spine) is also a possible complication of wearing a pack over just one shoulder. The safety guidelines for maximum weight carried on the backs of children call for nothing in excess of 15% of their body weight. (For example, a child weighing 50 pounds should carry no more than 7.5 lbs. An 80 pound child should carry no more than 12 lbs. A 100 pound child should carry no more than 15 lbs. A 130 pound child should carry no more than 19.5 lbs.)

To help prevent backpack injuries, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. Distribute the weight evenly. Put the heavier items on the bottom.
2. Wear both shoulder straps. Carrying weight using one strap, unevenly loads the spine, affecting bone, muscle and ligaments.
3. Lift it correctly: Face the pack, bend at the knees, check the weight of the pack using both hands, lift with your legs, carefully apply one shoulder strap at a time, avoiding slinging the pack onto your back.
4. Choose the right pack. Proper size is 75% of the length of the child's back, with heavily padded straps, and a waist strap to stabilize the load. Some packs even have a built in lumbar support. (One great brand to check out is Airpacks System at www.airpacks.com)

For more information, including an instructional video for kids, log on to American Backpack Safety's website at www.backpacksafe.com. Children's back problems are often resolved very quickly with chiropractic care. Check in with a local chiropractor if you have any further questions about preventing or treating backpack related problems.

This article is submitted as public health education from the Doctors at Hartwell Chiropractic and Wellness Center in Canby (503) 266-2997.