



Big Backpacks Equal Big Problems

Experts say heavy backpacks are a health risk for kids

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Like little turtles with limbs poking out from their shells, kids shuffle their way to school every day wearing giant backpacks. Even high school students have to bend forward to lug their heavy books and binders to and from school. It's frustrating and looks a little silly, but is it dangerous?

Yes, say many experts. "Kids are saying 'My back hurts, my neck and my shoulders hurt,'" says Dr. Karen Jacobs, a clinical professor at Boston University. "A heavy backpack can also contribute to headaches and problems concentrating at school."

Jacobs is also a spokesperson for the American Occupational Therapy Association, which sponsors a national school backpack awareness day on September 16. She says crowded schools and less locker space may be making backpacks bigger. "Since at least 1998, we've noticed backpacks

getting bigger and heavier, and not in proportion to the kids' sizes," Jacobs says.

Reporting Back Pain

A 2010 study from the University of California, San Diego, concluded, "backpack loads are responsible for a significant amount of back pain in children." The same study says a full third of kids ages 11 to 14 report back pain. Other research from 2011 came to a similar conclusion.

Like the frame of a house, the spine is what keeps bodies sturdy and upright. Put too much weight on this frame while a young body is still developing, and it could change a child's posture, compress the spine, and impair growth, says Rob Danoff, a doctor of osteopathic medicine with Philadelphia's Aria Health System. "It also might contribute to back problems or injuries when the child's older," he says.

Backpack Tips

Danoff says proper fit and design are important to relieve pressure from the spine and shoulders. You want a backpack that's made for your size. Padded shoulder straps and a cushioned back will also prevent aches and pains. Small roller bags are an option, but some schools do not allow them because they pose tripping hazards, or may litter classroom aisles or hallways in the event of a fire.

How heavy is too heavy? "As a general rule, research shows the backpack should be no more than 10 to 20 % of a child's body weight to avoid pain or potential injury," Jacobs says. "We like to recommend 10 %." For an elementary school child who weighs just 50 or 60 pounds, a couple textbooks and lunch could push a pack beyond the safe threshold. For that reason, Jacobs says it's important that kids are carrying only what they need. "We've noticed that students are taking lots and lots of water to school with them, which is a lot of extra weight," Jacobs says. She recommends packing an empty water bottle and filling it at school. Another tip is to pack the heaviest items in the middle of the pack, closer to the back.



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Experts warn against wearing a heavy backpack, like the one shown here.

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