

SCHOOL BAG DILEMMA

We know that back pain is a common complaint among adults. However, a recent trend of school children suffering from back, neck and shoulder pain is rather worrisome. Chiropractors, paediatricians and orthopaedic surgeons all agree that the carrying of heavy schoolbags and backpacks is a contributing factor.

The emerging of back pain at a young age is not surprising when one considers the disproportionate weight of a schoolbag carried by a scholar- often only slung over one shoulder. Amongst health care providers the consensus is that a child burdened with more than 10% of their body weight risks neck and back pain. The majority of healthcare professionals agree that a child carrying 15% or more of their own body weight can suffer severe back, neck and shoulder pain, headaches and other spinal discomfort. Pre-existing spinal conditions like scoliosis or Scheuermann's disease can be further aggravated by heavy backpacks. A study in France indicated that the longer a child carries a heavy schoolbag the longer it takes for a curvature or deformity of the spine to correct itself.

What can you do to avoid back problems in your children caused by the misuse of schoolbags?

The first priority is to purchase a good and preferably ergonomically designed backpack, selecting function over fashion. The following criteria should be considered when choosing a schoolbag for your child:

- The schoolbag should be carried on the back with straps over both shoulders.
- The backpack should fit properly, not being too long or too short. The bag should not hang more than 9cm below the waistline.
- It should have wide, padded, adjustable straps for proper positioning, cushioning and comfort. Urge your child to wear the bag over both shoulders. Lugging the bag around by one strap only causes a shift of the weight to one side, leading to muscle spasms, neck and low back pain.
- Trolleys and bags with wheels are not ideal, as they are pulled only with one arm, twisting the body and they need to be carried up and down staircases, often in awkward positions.
- A schoolbag with a contoured internal framework supports the load and ensures stability.
- A light aluminium framework allows minimal weight of schoolbag alone.
- Individualised compartments help to position the contents most effectively.
- Bigger is not necessarily better! The more room there is in a bag, the more your child will carry and the heavier the bag will be.
- A backpack with a hip strap or at least a lumbar pillow provides additional protection. The hip strap assists in distributing a portion of the weight to the hips, relieving the load on the shoulders and the spine. The lumbar pillow provides necessary back support to the lumbar region where the greatest portion of weight is being carried.

Parents need to show their children the importance of loading and carrying their



backpacks appropriately. The heaviest items should rest against the back.

If your child experiences pain or discomfort resulting from the use of a heavy schoolbag, contact a registered chiropractor. Chiropractors are experts in spinal health and are trained to diagnose and treat patients of all ages. With children a gentler type of treatment is used. Chiropractors will also prescribe exercises to help children develop stronger muscles together with postural advice when standing, sitting and sleeping.

Your child's spinal health depends on healthy postural habits, including the carrying of an orthopaedically or ergonomically designed schoolbag or backpack. Choose wisely.