

Choosing The Right Backpack For School

By: Dr. Stephen O'Neil

It's once again that time of year when summer is coming to a close and kids will be heading back to school soon. This brings about a need for new school supplies. Topping off that list is usually a new backpack or book bag. This may be the most important purchase when it comes to your child's spinal health.

"Carrying a poorly designed or overloaded backpack can place excessive weight on a child's growing spinal column. This kind of daily stress and strain can lead to serious back pain, changes in posture and gait and potential irritation and injury of the spine, joints and muscles." Dr. Dean Wright, President of the Ontario Chiropractic Association.

Many children suffer spinal related injuries just by following a few simple guidelines when purchasing and wearing a backpack.

1. Choose a backpack that is proportionate to body size and not larger than needed. The top should not extend higher than the top of the shoulder and bottom should not fall below the top of the hipbone.
2. A backpack should be made of a lightweight breathable material (vinyl or canvas instead of leather).
3. Shoulder straps should be at least two inches wide, adjustable and padded. Ensure that they do not cut into or fit too snugly around and under the arms.
4. The back of the pack should have some padding to protect the spine. Pack the odd shaped items on the outside so they don't dig into the back.
5. Pack it right. Evenly distribute the contents and pack the heaviest items closest to the body. This reduces the strain as the weight is closer to the body's centre of gravity.
6. A backpack with a hip strap or waist belt helps effectively redistribute as much as 50% to 70% of the weight off the shoulders and spine onto the pelvis, balancing the strain on the bones, joints and muscles.
7. A pack with multiple pockets instead of one large compartment will help to evenly distribute the weight and prevent contents from slipping.
8. The weight of the pack is very important. It should never weigh more than 15% of a high schooler or more than 10% of an elementary school child's body weight.
9. Many different styles of backpacks are available. Backpacks with wheels and a pull handle may be an option to decrease back strain.
10. Backpacks should be worn using both straps at all times to evenly distribute the weight and prevent neck and shoulder injuries.

It is important to advise your child not to over-pack his bag especially if walking for extended distances to or from school. When there is an overflow, extra items should be carried in the child's arms.

Bring your children in for a spinal and nervous system analysis and bring any other spinal or postural questions you may have. Spinal function is the backbone of optimal health.