

Keeping Backs Healthy as Kids Head Back to School

When kids head back to school, it can often be a weight off the shoulders of parents and caregivers. For the students, however, the literal weight of textbooks, folders and supplies can do some serious damage.

The risks of lugging around heavy backpacks are real. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that every year more than 14,000 children are treated for backpack-related injuries.

Kelly Bogowith, a physical therapist at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony's Health Center in Alton, Illinois, cites a Simmons College study that illustrates just how common the problem is.

"55% who wore backpacks were wearing them beyond the safe recommendation, which is a maximum of 10 to 15% of their body weight," said Bogowith. "Also in that study they found a third of the children were having back pain that caused them to miss school, see a physician or stay out of activities, so it's a pretty prominent problem."

According to Bogowith, children should never carry more than 10% of their body weight in a backpack. Too much weight can lead create abnormal stress on the body, and result in chronic problems down the road.

"We do know that kids who have back pain tend to have recurrent back pain, and once you have one episode of back pain, you tend to have additional. So, I think it's a concern that's definitely worthy of a parent taking a look at with their child," she said.

Even if the weight is right, Bogowith says wearing the backpack incorrectly can be just as damaging. She says backpacks should be worn with both straps on the shoulders, and the bottom of the backpack should land on the low back. If your child backpack is hitting his or her buttocks, it is too low and the straps need to be adjusted.

"If the child is leaning forward, or arching their back, or even just complaining of neck pain, shoulder pain or back pain, those are some things to further investigate into the proper fit of the backpack and the weight," says Bogowith.

Parents should be choosy when choosing a backpack for their kids. Backpacks should have two wide, adjustable padded shoulder straps. These help distribute the weight in the backpack and keep them from digging into the shoulders.

Also, look for backpacks that have many different compartments, to allow for even distribution of weight.

Following these simple steps can keep your kids' necks, shoulders and backs safe and prevent problems down the road.