



Media Contact: Simi Singer
E-mail: simi.singer@cshs.org
Telephone: 1-310-423-7798

BACK TO SCHOOL SAFETY: AVOIDING BACKPACK INJURY
Tips for helping your kids wear their backpacks safely

LOS ANGELES, August 10, 2006 – While it seems that every child carries a backpack during the school year, most parents – and children – are unaware of the potential injury that too-heavy packs can cause.

With school starting in just a few weeks, Dr. Leonel Hunt, director of spine trauma at Cedars-Sinai Institute for Spinal Disorders and Orthopedic Center, offers some advice to reduce the back and shoulder pain that as many as half of all school children experience each year.

“While backpacks are considered the most efficient way to carry books and other items kids need for school, it’s important they weigh less than 15 percent of a child’s body weight,” says Hunt. “Otherwise, over time, a child can experience back pain and soreness that can lead to problems that may require medical treatment.”

Compared to satchels or briefcases, backpacks are considered safer because they distribute weight evenly across the body and are supported by the back and abdominal muscles. Children and teens also prefer them because they are fashionable, hold more items, and come with multiple compartments that help them to stay organized.

But despite their usefulness, a major study recently reported by the American Physical Therapy Association has found that more than 50 percent of children surveyed carry backpacks that are too heavy.

“When a backpack is filled with heavy books and incorrectly positioned, the weight’s force can pull your child backward. To compensate, your child may bend forward at the hips or arch his or her back, causing the spine to compress unnaturally,” said Hunt. “This can lead to shoulder, neck and back pain.”

Wearing a backpack on one shoulder can also cause the child to lean to one side to compensate for the extra weight and can also lead to pain. In severe cases, children can develop a condition called “scapular winging,” which occurs when the nerve that supplies the shoulder muscle becomes pinched, causing the muscle to not function properly.

Girls and younger children may be especially at risk for backpack-related injuries because they are smaller and often carry loads that are heavier in proportion to their body weight.

“If your child complains of pain, or if you notice that one of your child’s shoulder blades is not moving or not symmetrical, a doctor should be consulted,” says Hunt.

To help your child wear a backpack safely, Dr. Hunt recommends the following:

1. **Keep backpack use limited to necessities only.** See that your child cleans out his or her backpack daily by removing any items that can be left at home or in a locker.
2. **Distribute weight evenly.** Encourage your child to wear both straps of the backpack whenever he or she carries it. This will help distribute the weight of the backpack evenly across the back and promote good posture.
3. **Recognize signs that the backpack is too heavy.** Pay attention to whether your child is slouched or leaning to one side when wearing a backpack or is experiencing any type of back pain, tingling or numbness in the shoulders or arms.
4. **Select the proper backpack.** Enhance comfort and safety by purchasing a backpack with multiple compartments, so that weight is more evenly distributed. Padded straps can also help prevent straps from cutting into shoulders. Newer backpacks with wheels are also an option, provided that the handle extends long enough to allow children to stand upright while pulling it. The backpack and wheels must also be sturdy enough so that it does not topple over.
5. **Pick up the backpack properly.** Teach your child how to pick up his or her backpack by demonstrating how to bend at the knees and grasp the pack with both hands before putting it on.

“Pain and injury caused by backpacks can be avoided,” says Hunt. “Encourage your child to pay attention to this issue in September and throughout the school year.”

The Cedars-Sinai Orthopedic Center is a comprehensive and advanced center dedicated to the evaluation, diagnosis and treatment of orthopedic diseases, disorders and injuries. The center, which also offers minimally-invasive and reconstructive surgery, treats both children and adults.

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