

Kid's Health: Lighten the Backpack

August 20, 2011

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Kids already consider homework a pain in the neck, but in reality, it's the overloaded backpack we should be worried about.

Dr. Sara Levine, a Boca Raton doctor of internal medicine and pediatrics, said she sees it all the time – kids with back, neck and shoulder pain.

"Sometimes it's from backpacks, without question," she said.

The load can affect kids' posture, which can lead to worse problems in adulthood. The pain can hurt their sports performance. They may be too sore to exercise, which can lead to weight gain.

What can parents do about it?

- Make sure your child's backpack weighs no more than 10 to 15 percent of his total body weight.
- If they must carry a heavier load, use a wheeled bag that can be pulled along the ground.
- Tell the kids to use both shoulder straps; don't put all the weight on one shoulder. (Only use the messenger bag style if you have a very light load; even one textbook is too heavy).
- Put heavy items at the bottom for stability.
- The backpack should fit snugly above the waist, below the neck, in the midsection of the back.
- Look for a bag with padded shoulder straps and padding on the back.
- Encourage the kids to clean them out every week.

With more and more textbooks online, many kids are being asked to carry around fewer books, which can help. But it is tempting to fill the bag to capacity.

You take a small child, give her a teen-size backpack to accommodate the binders she needs, then continue to load it up, and pretty soon you have a 50-pound kid about to tip over, said Levine, herself a mom of three kids ages 8 to 15.

Orthopedic surgeons have done studies on the issue, often finding signs of strain on children's backs.

Levine, who has a private practice affiliated with West Boca Medical Center and Boca Raton Regional Hospital, said that even if a child's X-ray or MRI looks normal, the pain is real.

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