



# Backpacks - Lighten Your Load!

Kevin Van Es, BSc PT

Backpacks can be great for students, however, they can also be problematic or stressful on the body. Recent literature suggests an increase in reported back, neck and shoulder injuries associated with improperly carrying a backpack. Fortunately, there are a number of simple steps parents and students can take to maximize the safe functional use of a backpack.

Posture primarily refers to the alignment of the spine. Sitting and standing taller, as well as avoiding leaning to one side, are important postural awareness concepts we can all work on. When a student adds the weight of a backpack to a poor postural position, this accentuates the potential for injury. This is particularly important if the backpack weighs more than 10-15% of his/her body weight. A backpack worn properly over both shoulders can actually make it easier to stand up straighter, but when worn over one shoulder, it promotes poor alignment of the spine. Wearing a backpack over both shoulders also distributes the weight more evenly across the back, keeping the weight of the pack closer to the larger muscles of the body.

There are a wider variety of backpacks available. A backpack should be comfortable, functional, and even fashionable. Wide, padded shoulder straps are more comfortable and distribute the weight of the backpack better, however, this is not so the backpack can be heavily loaded. Utilize the different compartment in the backpack, always packing the heaviest items closest to the body, usually in the main compartment. The side compression straps also help keep the contents of the backpack from sagging away from the body. The hip straps can be very useful for more prolonged periods of carrying the backpack - these straps help to redistribute the weight of the backpack to the hips giving the shoulders a break.

## Tips for Students

- Pack light & Use the straps over both shoulders
- Use the side compression straps to keep the contents of the backpack closer to your body
- Pack the heavier items (text books) closer to your body in the larger compartments
- When carrying the pack for long periods, use the hip straps to take weight off your shoulders
- Pack only the books you need that day
- Use your locker to store items during the day
- If you are experiencing neck, back, or shoulder pain, talk to your parents

## Tips for Parents

- Do not overload backpacks (10-15% of body weight maximum) and pack the heavier items closest to the body
- Look at your child wearing his/her backpack. If the pack looks either too big or too heavy, check the contents and evaluate what needs to be in the pack. Determine if the pack itself needs to be changed
- Help your children plan what they actually need to bring back and forth to school, including text books
- Encourage children to use straps over both shoulders
- If you notice your child complaining of a sore back, neck, or shoulder, look at their backpack carrying habits
- Consult a physical therapist for more specific information if needed

