

Backpacks and Back Pain: Bearing the Load

That backpack your child carries to school every day may be heavier than you think. A typical elementary school student carries 10 to 20 pounds in their backpacks, which can often be up to 20 or 30 percent of their body weight.

While not all kids feel the strain of toting heavy packs all day, about 1 in 10 students complains of lower back pain. A common cause is poorly designed and overloaded backpacks. But kids are also responsible. Often students don't wear their packs properly, or carry them for the entire day, which can put a lot of stress on the back.

While many schools are working on plans to help lighten loads, there are some things you can do. Check your child's backpack in the morning before school to make sure it isn't too heavy. A filled pack should weigh no more than 30 percent of a child's body weight, which means some nonessentials might have to be left home. Make sure both shoulder straps are pulled tightly to your child's back to reduce the amount of stress placed on the lower back. Finally, when shopping for a backpack, look for one with padding on the back panel and shoulder straps.

Overloaded backpacks can cause short term back pain, but there is little evidence that there are any serious long-term consequences. A heavy pack won't cause bad posture and current research has found no link between backpacks and scoliosis (curvature of the spine). But if your kids are experiencing pain, try to lighten their packs or talk to us.