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Back to School Backpack Safety

Summer is coming to a close and it's time to go shopping for all your back-to-school needs, including perhaps the most essential item on the list – the backpack. While backpacks are a stylish way for your child to express their personal taste, they can also do injury to your child's back. An osteopathic physician from Kentucky gives advice for choosing the best backpack for your child.

"Heavy backpacks can be hazardous to your child's health," says the doctor. "When used improperly, backpacks are known to pull on ligaments and muscles that cause different aches and pains throughout the neck and back. In severe cases, they can contribute to deformity of the spine," the doctor adds.

When it comes to back safety, how to choose the right backpack is critical. Here are five things to look for in the perfect backpack:

1. **Wide, padded, and adjustable shoulder straps.** "Narrow straps dig into shoulders and can cause pain," says the doctor. To avoid this, our physician recommends backpacks with wide, padded straps. The straps should also be adjustable so that you are able to make the backpack rest on the strongest part of your back. According to the doctor, failure to do so can cause misalignment, pain, and a condition called sway back, which occurs when the spine is curved inward due to compensating heavy objects carried on the back.
2. **Two straps.** Having only one strap can also cause alignment problems in the spine. The doctor cautions that just having two straps is not always enough. "Two straps are only effective if both straps are used," says the doctor.
3. **Padded back.** The padding on the part of the backpack that touches your pack should provide protection from any oddly-shaped objects inside. "Padded backs relieve strain put on the back when carrying heavy materials," says the physician.
4. **Lightweight.** "Backpacks that are heavy when nothing is in them do nothing but add weight to the back," warns our doctor.
5. **A lot of compartments.** This helps in distributing the weight so it isn't all carried in one place.

Once your child is outfitted with a safe and comfortable backpack, you can further prevent injury by encouraging your child to do the following:

1. **Use a locker.** The more time your child's supplies are in a locker, the less time the supplies are on her back.
2. **Don't wait until the last minute.** Make sure your child is not waiting until the weekend to do all of her homework. "When your child waits until the end of the week to bring her work home, she is most likely carrying every book with her and significantly

increasing the weight of her backpack,” says the doctor. “By doing it throughout the week, you can establish a schedule of books to carry to and from school,” the doctor adds.

3. **Speak up when it hurts.** If your child does start to experience back or neck pain, make sure they are able to tell you. “When pain is present, it is important to invest in a new backpack as soon as possible,” our consulting doctor says.

“While the type of backpack your child uses may reflect a type of style, make sure that it also reflects safety,” says the doctor. “And don’t forget that it is just as important for adults to make sure their own backpacks, purses, diaper bags, etc. are not holding excessive weight and that they are carrying them around properly.”

Preventive medicine is just one aspect of care osteopathic physicians provide. DOs are fully licensed to prescribe medicine and practice in all specialty areas, including surgery. DOs are trained to consider the health of the whole person and use their hands to help diagnose and treat their patients.