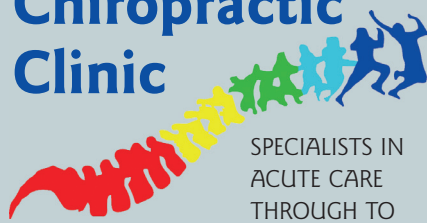


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Back Talk

WITH MARTIN PRESS



Those lazy, hazy carefree days of summer are well and truly over for most of us and with the return to reality we once again face those traditional back pain aggravators like increased stress ...and having to lug around hefty school bags, briefcases and handbags.

Many of us do not distribute weight evenly over our back. We tend say to carry one bag in one hand and then, when it gets heavy, we swap it to the other side. It would be far better to distribute the load into two bags and carry one in each hand.

Carrying any heavy bag over one shoulder also creates stress on your back, and whether left or right handed we all favour one side over the other which means our bodies have to compensate for this imbalance on a daily basis. When we have muscles really pulling hard on one side it increases both the bone density and muscles on that side while the other side remains weaker and more likely to develop injuries.

That's why I recommend people use free weights at the gym. When you work out using weight machines their design means your strong side automatically helps out your weak side. You get better performance with free weights where your body is consistently balancing itself trying to equal things out.

There is no doubt carrying heavy bags incorrectly causes problems for adults, but it is youngsters who are most at risk with a very real danger of them suffering spinal damage as a result of too heavy school backpacks. In the growing years joints and bones are all sensitive to stresses and the foundations are set for adult life. For example a tree grows in a consistently northerly wind and its roots develop in one direction more than another. The wind suddenly swings around and the tree falls over. Bone strength works in the same way – stresses are placed on the bone which grows in particular ways due to those stresses.

There has been very little research carried out but Australian data has it about 70 per cent of schoolchildren may be damaging their spines by carrying schoolbags. A heavy bag slung over one shoulder, can,

over 12 years of schooling, cause chronic back problems their material suggests.

Parents need to buy ergonomic backpacks, teach their children how to pack their bags and how to lift and wear them properly. A backpack should weigh less than 10 per cent of a child's body weight.

10 GOLDEN RULES FOR BACKPACKS

1. Ensure any backpack purchased is approved by the child – if it is 'uncool', they will not use it.
2. Buy backpacks with wide, padded and adjustable shoulder straps. Padded straps help absorb the load while narrow straps can dig painfully into shoulders.
3. Look for a backpack with "S" shaped shoulder straps. These will ergonomically contour to a child's body.
4. Choose a backpack with a moulded frame and/or adjustable hip strap so the weight of the full backpack will rest on the child's pelvis rather than their shoulders or spines.
5. Be sure the backpack is the right size. It should not be wider or longer than your child's torso, (i.e. from the bony bump at the base of the neck down to the top of the hips.)
6. Pack heavy items so they are closest to the child's back and make sure they can't move around. It is important to be balanced in the natural centre of gravity.
7. Make sure the child understands carrying a backpack over one shoulder will cause pack pain and possible injury.
8. Consider the weight of the backpack when empty. Canvas bags are lighter than leather.
9. Suggest to children they use lockers to store unneeded books and sports equipment.
10. Do not try to save money by buying the biggest pack 'to last through college' – buy one appropriate to the child's size. ■