

Backpacks can impact child's health

By DR. JOANNE DAVIS

As the new school year is on the threshold, many parents will be purchasing school supplies. One supply in particular, the backpack, can have a significant effect on your child's health. Many people don't realize the impact that backpacks can have on a child's health and the importance of both buying the proper pack and loading it correctly.

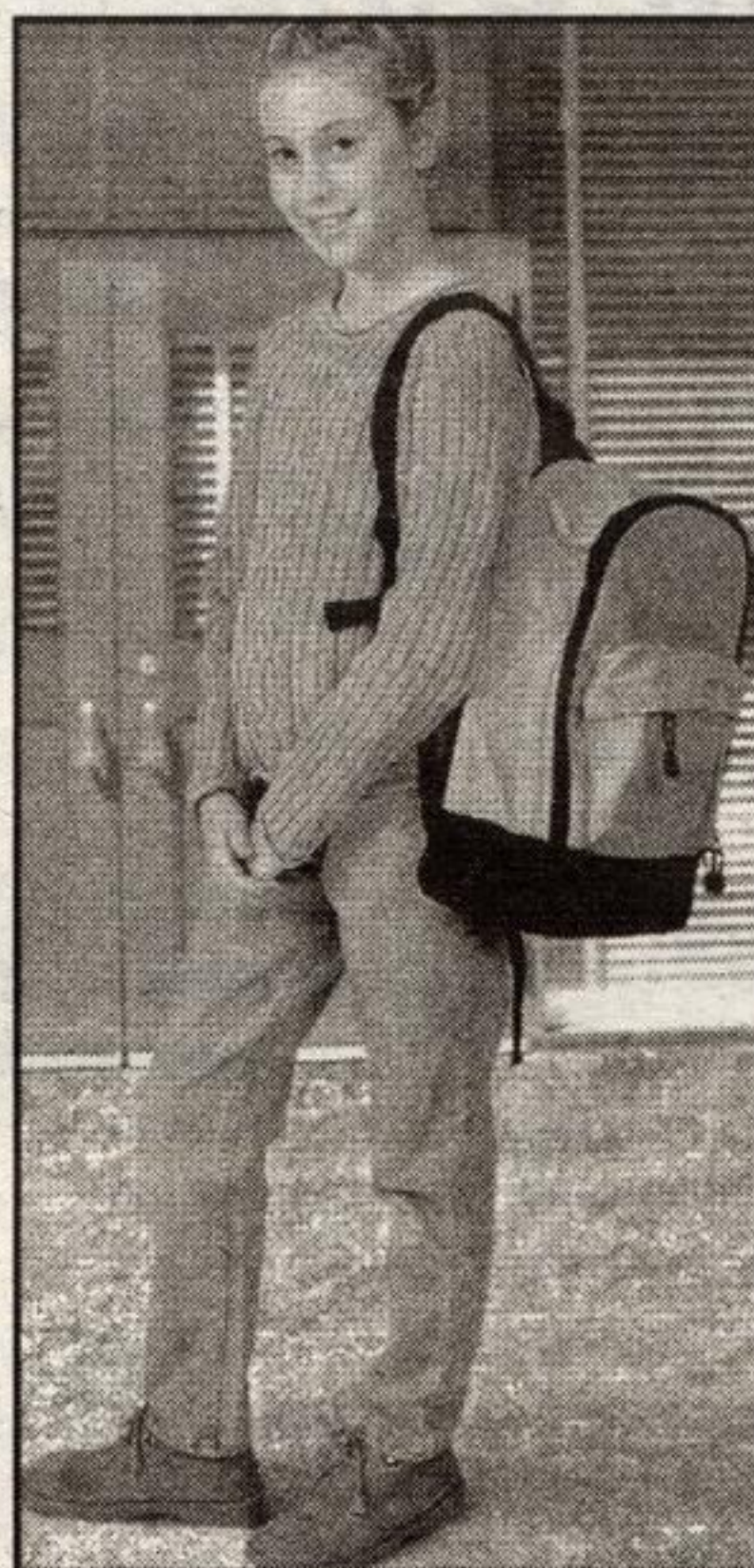
Kids think it's "cool" to strap on their backpacks and head out to school. But if they don't know exactly how to choose, load, lift and wear them, these all-important accessories can be a pain in the back. Literally. Not to mention the neck, head, and shoulders.

Can affect health
Carrying a heavy load that is unevenly or improperly distributed can result in poor posture; and even distort the spinal column, throwing it out of alignment. This can cause muscle strain, headaches, back, neck and arm pain, and even nerve damage.

For example, a heavy backpack, carried on one shoulder, forces the muscles and spine to compensate for the uneven weight. This places stress on the mid and lower back, and may increase the likelihood of back problems later in life.

More than 50 per cent of young people experience at least one episode of lower back pain by their teenage years. Research indicates that this could be caused, to a great extent, by improper use of backpacks.

Prevention key
Here are a few pointers to help you help your school age children carry their load comfortably and safely:



Choose the right backpack: Forget leather! It looks great, but it's far too heavy. Go for vinyl or canvas. Pick a pack that has two wide, adjustable, padded shoulder straps, along with a hip or waist strap, padded back and plenty of pockets. Make sure the pack fits properly, is not too snug around the arms and under the armpits, and that its size is proportionate to the wearer's body.

Packing it properly: They're not moving out! Make sure your children's packs contain only what is needed for that day, and that the weight is distributed evenly. It's a good idea to know roughly what each item weighs. The total weight of the filled pack should be no more than 10 to 15 per cent of the wearer's own body weight. Pack heaviest objects close to the body, and place bumpy or odd-shaped ones on the outside, away from the back.

Putting the backpack on: It's a good idea to help young children with this, at least the first few times. Put the pack on a flat surface, at waist height. Slip on the pack, one shoulder at a

time, then adjust the straps to fit comfortably.

Remember when lifting a backpack, or anything, to lift using the arms and legs, and to bend at the knees.

The right way to wear a backpack: Both shoulder straps should be used, and adjusted so that the pack fits snugly to the body, without dangling to the side. Backpacks should never be worn over just one shoulder. You should be able to slide your hand between the backpack and your child's back. The waist strap should also be worn for added stability.

Students in Grades K to 8 should carry only 10% of their weight in their backpacks. Students in Grades 9 to 12 may carry up to 15% of their weight.

How much does all the stuff that goes into a backpack actually weigh? Here is a list of typical items that students carry in their packs for your reference:

Shoes 1kg/2lbs, wet towel 1kg/2lbs, 6 text books 2.7kg/6lbs, 2 binders 1.5kg/3lbs, 20CDs 0.5kg/1lb, Game-Boy 0.25kg/

0.5lbs, water bottle 0.25kg/0.5lbs, sports gear 4.5kg/10lbs, lunch/snacks 1kg/2lbs, laptop computer 2.7kg/6lbs.

To calculate your child's maximum load:

1 Weigh your child and record it.

2 Figure out their maximum load. It's 10% for Grades K-8 and 15% for Grades 9-12. So, if your child is in Grade 5 and weighs 90 pounds, the calculation is $0.1 \times 90 = 9$ lbs, which is their maximum load.

3 Weigh the contents of the backpack. This can be done by simply placing the loaded pack on a bathroom scale.

4 Compare their maximum load to the weight of the loaded pack. You may be surprised! If the load is over, it may be time to lighten the load!

If your child does complain of back pain, numbness or weakness in his or her arms and legs, get help to prevent future problems.

Dr. Joanne Davis is a Chiropractor working at the Thompson Wellness Centre in Acton.

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