

Cover Photo: Child with a new backpack. Prey Veang, Cambodia. June, 2010. Taken by Lt. Mike Morley. Released into public domain by the United States Navy.



Heavy Backpacks



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Heavy Backpacks

It's the end of the school day. You put your math, reading, and science textbooks into your backpack. You put your notebooks for math, reading, and science in too. All of them will be needed for tonight's homework. Your backpack is now so full you can barely zip it up. You have to carry your lunch bag and jacket because there's no more room in the backpack. You put your arms through the straps of the backpack and almost fall over! It's so heavy that you have to walk slowly to catch the bus home.

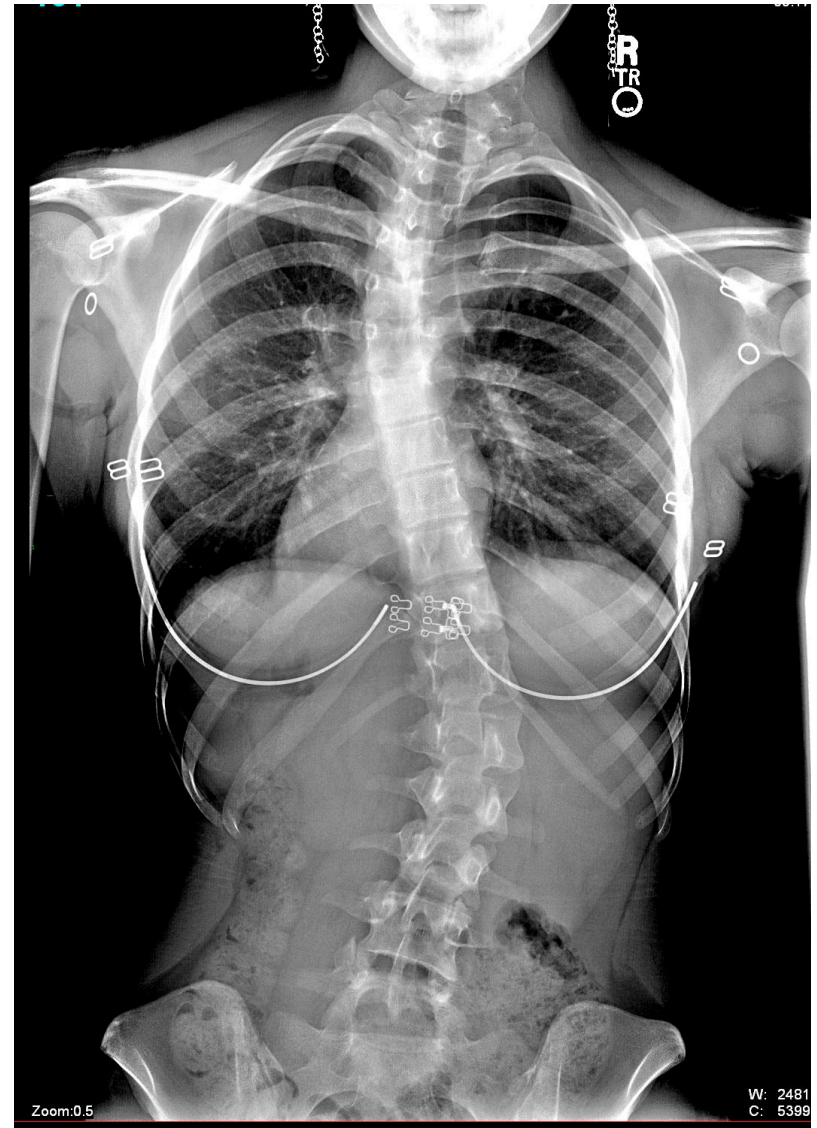
Backpacks are a convenient way to carry lots of stuff. Your hands are free! Since backpacks zip shut, things don't fall out. Having pockets helps to keep items organized. Since backpacks are so handy, kids just keep adding more to them. Backpacks can quickly become very heavy, especially for school kids who are not yet fully grown. In this book, you will find out why parents, doctors, and teachers are concerned about students carrying heavy backpacks. What are the problems caused by carrying heavy loads? What are the solutions? Read to learn more. Then share your ideas about what could be done to lighten the load.

What Do Doctors Say About Heavy Backpacks

Every year about 7,000 kids go to hospital emergency rooms because of injuries caused by backpacks. Some injuries, like broken bones or twisted ankles, cause pain right away. Other injuries to the back may not hurt right away. Sometimes back pain may begin a few days after an injury. Several small back injuries can even add up and cause pain many years later.

People carrying heavy backpacks tend to bend over when they stand or walk. Their backs are curved forward and their shoulders are up near their ears. This is poor posture. Poor posture is okay if it happens once in a while. But some children are carrying heavy backpacks every school day. Doctors are starting to see children whose backs are arched forward even when they don't have their backpacks on. This kind of poor posture can shift bones in the spine and, over time, cause back pain.

Children did not carry backpacks to school until quite recently. Your parents may have carried backpacks to school but your grandparents probably didn't. Because frequent backpack use by kids is fairly recent, scientists are still finding out about the effects of heavy backpacks. They continue to study whether carrying heavy backpacks can change the way children's bones and muscles grow. Most of all, doctors and scientists want to know how heavy is too heavy.



Letter to the Residents of Apple Grove School District

Dear Sir or Madam,

In a recent event at Midtown Elementary School, a student broke her leg after tripping and falling while wearing a heavy backpack. Even though everyone agrees that it was an accident, my staff and I reviewed all the accidents involving backpacks that occurred in the past few years. We found that there have been a number of injuries involving backpacks. None has been as severe as the one at Midtown Elementary but there have been enough injuries to make me concerned about the safety of our students and teachers.

By studying public health reports, my staff and I found that injuries from tripping over backpacks in classrooms and buses are just part of the problem. Doctors are also concerned about the negative effects of heavy backpacks on students' backs. There were also reports from school districts on the possible spread of diseases from lice and bedbugs that sometimes live in or on backpacks.

In Apple Grove, our first concern is the health and learning of our students. That is why we are putting a "no backpack rule" into place this school year. Students can bring a small bag or lunchbox including a few personal items to school. But students will not be allowed to bring backpacks to school. Teachers will be asked to limit homework to one subject each night so that students will need to take only one textbook home.

Thank you for helping to make our schools safer places for our students to learn and grow.

Erica Bond
Superintendent,
Apple Grove School District



Letter to the Superintendent of Apple Grove School District

Dear Ms. Bond,

The accident with the backpack happened in my classroom. Everyone in my class was very worried so I am glad that you have looked into the issue. But I don't believe the next step should be a ban on backpacks.

I need to carry textbooks back and forth from school to home. In addition, I need to bring my lunch and clothes for physical education. I always take my toothbrush and toothpaste to school to brush my teeth after lunch. By the time I get all of this into a bag, the bag is too heavy for me to carry in one hand or over my shoulder. Next, I have the problem of what to do with these items when I get to school. I have little space in my desk. I also believe that bags on the floor of the classroom can cause as many problems as backpacks have. The backpack ban doesn't make sense to me.

To me, the real problem is the amount of stuff we have to carry to and from school. Can anything be done to lessen the number of books or things students take to school? I am worried that I will have back pain later in life because I have to carry so much back and forth from home to school. I do not think that a backpack ban fixes the real problem here.

Sincerely,
Jane Ze
Fifth-Grade Student,
Midtown Elementary School



Alternatives to Heavy Backpacks

One big reason for heavy backpacks is the weight of textbooks. As of 2011, only two states have laws about the weight of textbooks. In California, a textbook for grades 4 and below has to weigh less than 3 pounds. But even 3 pounds per book is a lot when students carry several textbooks in their backpacks. What are alternatives?

One alternative is for books to be “on computers” as e-books. But not all students have computers or access to the internet at home. Some schools offer laptops or electronic tablets that students can take home but these schools are still quite rare. In the future, perhaps all students will have access to laptops or electronic tablets; but in the short run it does not solve the problem.

A simple alternative is for students to roll their backpacks, rather than carry them. Rolling backpacks are like suitcases people use when they travel. Since rolling backpacks stand upright, they also would take up less space in classrooms.

Schools are also exploring ways to lessen the number of textbooks students need for homework. Some schools have two sets of textbooks, one for students to use at home and one for the classroom. But few schools have the money for a second set of textbooks. Other schools are looking at different forms of homework. One idea is to give homework that does not use a textbook. Still other schools set aside time for students to do their homework at school. That way, when students are done with their homework, the textbooks stay at school.



Helpful Tips

According to experts, the best kind of backpack is one worn on the back with two straps. The straps should be thick and padded since thick padded straps won't dig into the skin and muscle like thin, narrow straps. Backpacks with only one strap or backpacks worn with only one strap tend to raise one shoulder and lower the other shoulder. Uneven shoulders can cause neck and shoulder pain.

Some experts believe that a backpack and its contents should weigh no more than one tenth of the wearer's weight. Using this rule, the backpacks of most fourth grade students would weigh between 6 and 9 pounds. If a book weighs 3 pounds, that means no more than two books. And there would still be room for other things like pens, paper, and lunch.

A common tip is to place the heaviest things so that they are as close to the wearer's back as possible. This way, a person is less likely to tip backward and fall. The middle of the backpack should be at the middle of your back; not too high or not too low.

If your hands are tingling or numb, you should take your backpack off. Tingling and numbness are signs that the backpack may be cutting off the flow of blood to your arms and hands. If the tingling or numbness continues, tell an adult right away. The best tip of all is to limit what you carry in your backpack. Leave as much as you can at home or at school and don't carry it around with you.



What do you think?

How do you carry your books and school supplies to and from school? Do you use a backpack? Is it useful for you to use a backpack to carry your school supplies?

What books and school supplies do you bring home every day? Is there something that you or your teacher can do so that you don't have to bring home every day?

Does your school have rules about backpacks or how heavy backpacks can be?

Have you used other forms of backpacks? For example, have you ever used a rolling backpack, or a bag that rests at your side, instead of your back? How do they compare to backpacks?

Should there be school rules about heavy backpacks?

No, I think there should not be rules about heavy backpacks because...	Yes, I think there should be rules about heavy backpacks because...
Explain why it is hard to have rules about backpacks.	Explain where we could find out more information on heavy backpacks.