

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

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Carrying backpacks safely

Backpacks are handy for carrying books, school supplies — and lots of other things. But if they're not used right, they can strain muscles and even cause back pain. Backpack safety is important for everyone, but it's especially important for children, who can be hurt by regularly carrying too much weight or by not wearing their backpacks properly.

Experts say a child shouldn't carry more than 15- to 20-per-cent of their weight on their back. Don't guess — use your washroom scale to weigh the loaded pack. It is also important to make sure your child can stand up straight while wearing a backpack. If they must lean forward to wear it comfortably, the pack is too heavy. To assist in proper weight distribution throughout the backpack, pack the heaviest items closest to the back.

Pack wearers should use both shoulder straps. It may seem easier or more comfortable to sling the pack over just one shoulder. However it can lead to back or shoulder pain. Use the waist belt as much as possible and ensure the straps are tightened so the pack fits snugly.

To further reduce the risk of injury, teach your child to pick up a heavy backpack correctly. Never bend down from the waist to pick up or set down a heavy pack. Always squat down, bending at the knee and keeping the back straight. If needed, children can put one knee on the floor and the other knee in front of them while they lift the pack and swing it around to their back.

You can also talk to your child about using his or her locker, if one is available, to keep from carrying everything around all day.

When looking for a backpack ahead of the school year, keep these things in mind to encourage a pain-free experience for your children:

- **Lightweight.** Leather backpacks may look nice, but other materials, like canvas or nylon, weigh less.
- **Wide, padded shoulder straps.** A loaded pack will dig into shoulders if the straps are too skinny.

- **Waist belt.** This is an important feature. It takes some weight off of the back and transfers it to the hips.
- **Handy compartments.** The more, the better. They help distribute the weight evenly. They also make packs easier to organize.
- **Padded back.** This keeps sharp edges from digging into the back.
- **Wheels.** These are nice if you or your child needs to carry a lot. But check with your child's school to make sure they're allowed. Remember that these packs will still have to be carried up stairs. And they can get messy when pulled through mud or snow.

Lastly, it is important to encourage your children to inform you if they experience any pain or soreness. If your child is having back pain or neck soreness, talk to your doctor.