



NEWS RELEASE

September 2004

By Anna Martin
Nutrition, Family and Consumer Sciences Advisor
UCCE San Joaquin County

Back to School: Backpack Safety

According to the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC), overloaded backpacks send about 5,000 school children to the emergency room each year. Backpacks that are too heavy or are worn incorrectly can cause severe back, neck, and shoulder pain, as well as posture problems for children and teenagers.

When used correctly, backpacks can be a good way to carry the necessities of the school day. They are designed to distribute the weight of the load among some of the body's strongest muscles.

Shopping for a Backpack

Look for a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps and a padded back. Narrow straps can dig into shoulders. This can cause pain and restrict circulation. A backpack with a padded back will protect a child against sharp edges on objects inside the pack and increase comfort.

Using a Backpack Safely

To prevent injury when using a backpack, do the following:

- Pack light. The backpack should never weigh more than 10 to 20 percent of the student's body weight. For example, a child that weighs 80 pounds his or her backpack shouldn't weigh more than 8 to 12 pounds.
- Always use both shoulder straps. Slinging a backpack over one shoulder can strain muscles. Wearing a backpack on one shoulder may increase curvature of the spine.
- Organize the backpack to use all of its compartments. Pack heavier items closest to the center of the back.
- Pick up the backpack the right way. As with any heavy weight, your child should bend at the knees and grab the pack with both hands when lifting a backpack to the shoulders.
- Use a rolling backpack. This type of backpack may be a good choice for students who must tote a heavy load. Remember that rolling backpacks still must be carried upstairs. And they may be difficult to roll in snow.

A lot of the responsibility for packing lightly - and safely - rests with your child. Encourage your child to use the locker (if one is available) or desk frequently throughout the day instead of carrying the entire day's worth of books in the backpack. Also, make sure your child isn't toting unnecessary items; laptops, CD players, and video games can add extra pounds to your child's pack.

Encourage your child to bring home only the books that are needed for homework or studying each night. Finally, if you notice that your child seems to have a heavier pack on Fridays, ask about their homework planning. He or she may be procrastinating on homework until the weekend, which may make the backpack much heavier.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2004; The Nemours Foundation, 2004; Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America, 2004.