

The Wellness Family

Dr. Gerken Keeps You Informed

Back-to-School and Repetitive-Stress-Syndrome

It's that time of year again, you've spent a small fortune on new clothes and school supplies and your kids are into a new school year. Among those many purchases was probably a new backpack and, depending upon the grade of your child, perhaps a laptop or a cell phone. It may surprise you to know that repetitive stress syndrome is caused by these seemingly harmless items.

The Backpack

Chiropractors, pediatricians and orthopedic surgeons alike agree that backpacks are a problem for your child's spine. While alone they may not cause major problems, overloading and improper carrying of a backpack can lead to headaches, neck, shoulder, and lower back pain.

An article published in *Spine* journal stated, "Of 1,122 backpack users, 74% were classified as having back pain, validated by significantly poorer general health, more limited physical function, and more bodily pain".

How heavy is too heavy?

While healthcare professionals do not agree on the exact weight, the consensus is that more than 10% of your child's body weight can lead to back and neck pain; and the majority of healthcare professionals agree that 15% or more of their body weight can lead to severe back, neck and shoulder pain as well as headaches and other spinal discomfort; not to mention aggravating pre-existing conditions such as scoliosis.

How heavy is too heavy? A 60-pound child should be limited to carrying no more than 9 pounds; an 80-pound child, 12 pounds; and a 100-pound pre-adolescent should carry no more than 15 pounds.

So, how do we lighten the load?

It's important to weigh your child's backpack at least once a week. If it exceeds 15% of your child's weight, then work with your child to evaluate their backpack and lighten the load. The "extra" book, binder, electronic device or water bottle can easily add a hefty and unnecessary extra 10 pounds.

Proper Loading and Carrying

Take a moment to show your child or teen the importance of loading and carrying their backpack. The heaviest items should rest against the back, which means loading them first and attempting to distribute the weight evenly.

While your child or teen may think nothing of carrying their backpack slung over one shoulder, the truth is this fashion statement is damaging to their developing spine; one shoulder is being required to carry a burden that both shoulders and the back should be sharing. The only proper way to carry a backpack is with both straps over the shoulders and the backpack resting against the lower back.



"Many adult spinal problems start with repetitive stress syndrome as a child and teen."

So as you are preparing your child or teen to return to school, take a brief moment to educate them about the proper handling of their backpack; understanding that when your child lifts and slings their backpack over their shoulder it's a repetitive stress to a still developing spine.

Cell Phones, Laptops and Electronic Gadgets

It's rare today to see a teen or even a pre-adolescent child who doesn't have at least one electronic device. Either they're carrying around a cell phone and texting like crazy, or they have a Nintendo DS or something equivalent that they're playing. They could be sitting on a bench with their laptop open to the latest video game craze or checking their email, or perhaps they're wearing the newest MP3 player.

Take a moment to picture your child with one of these familiar items and notice their posture. Are they sitting

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up straight with their head balanced over their shoulders? Not as a rule. The reality is that when using any of these popular items, your child will more than likely be hunched over with their head down, their shoulders up and their arms held above waist level.

Every instance of this poor posture is another opportunity to stress their spine. The head hunched over (head and neck flexion) is being supported, not equally by the shoulders, but solely by their still developing cervical spine.

The arms that are being held above waist level are being supported by the same upper cervical spine and the shoulders being pulled up and drawn forward are causing repetitive stress to the mid and lower back.

Speak with your children now about improved spinal care and how to better spend time and limit their time with these types of electronic devices.

Sports, Sports and More Sports

Repetitive Stress Syndrome is the result of a child or teen repeatedly moving in a manner that their body wasn't created to; and this happens most frequently when playing sports. The popular sport, soccer, is a perfect example. The child will run, maneuver and then kick, with the same leg, repeatedly. This child is not using both legs evenly, thus stressing the spine on only one side the majority of the time. Even worse, they may hit the ball with their head causing repetitive stress injuries to the upper neck region.

Consider the most popular sport for teens, football. Any teen playing football will tend to have a strong side, especially if they're passing or kicking. Swinging the same arm to throw or leg to kick, over and over again, causes repetitive stress syndrome to a spine that is just finishing its development.

Other sports with one side dominance can include: baseball, softball, water polo, tennis, and golf.

So, what do we do?

Educate your child on the importance of symmetry in their bodies. What they do with one side, they should do with the other. So, during warm-ups be sure to have your child or teen move the non-dominant arm and leg equally to train the body in balance.

Top Five Tips for Spinal Health Care

5. When practicing for a sport, switch legs and arms frequently. What you do with one limb should be done with the other.
4. When listening to an I-Pod or MP3 player, be sure to keep your head up as much as possible; looking down at the device for extended periods of time with strain your neck, shoulders and upper spine.
3. When playing video games, be sure to take frequent breaks; if your body is stiff when you're finished playing, you've been playing too long.
2. Load and carry your backpack properly, do not sling it over one shoulder and never carry more than 15% of your body weight.
1. Get spinal checkups regularly. Many adult spinal problems start with repetitive stress syndrome as a child and teen.

For more information visit:
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Computer_games_health_issues

Dear Parent,

Dr. Gerken is dedicated to providing you with the absolute best in family wellness care. Take a moment today to ask your Family Wellness Chiropractor any questions you may have regarding your child or teens spinal healthcare habits.

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