

HEAVY BAGS ON YOUNG SHOULDERS

It's nearly back to school time again. Before we know it, the streets will be full of youngsters with big school bags. In fact, some of them are so big, one wonders how the little child can lift it at all. Can it be good for them, we ask ourselves, as we see them struggle to lug the bag onto the bus or in and out of the car. Well, thanks to recent work carried out by the Physiotherapy services of the Midland Health Board, parents now have information available to them about the do's and don'ts of schoolbags.

A study was carried out by the Physiotherapy services of the Midland Health Board on how school bags can cause problems. Most children seem to carry their bags by throwing one strap over a shoulder, especially rucksacks. The child's balance and posture are now thrown over to one side. A similar problem arises when a heavy bag is being held in one hand, as the poor student has a heavy weight pulling him or her over to one side. Occasionally carrying a bag or a rucksack in this way for a short while does no major harm - we've all done it, in bus stations and airports. But carrying a heavy bag in this way for at least several minutes at a time twice a day puts a large amount of strain on the muscles, ligaments and joints. While pain rather than just tiredness is rare enough in young people, this is only because their ligaments and tendons are more flexible and heal more quickly than in older people. They still have a limit, however, and being forced to work at or over that limit for prolonged periods puts the whole system at risk of breakdown.

So, how does one deal with this problem? There are 2 main areas to look at. Firstly, does the child or teenager **really need** all the various books, copies etc that are in the huge bag every day? Remember, young people, especially children, are not the best at planning and organising. They may not always be able to decide what to leave and what to bring. Go through their days with them and help them to make out a list for every day and make sure that the bag is checked every night after homework is done so that nothing unnecessary is in the bag. That way, it's unlikely that anything will be forgotten either, which would be more likely than ever to make the child refuse to ever take anything out of the bag. Try and talk to other parents, the school and individual teachers also. It may be possible to leave certain items in school or have a system whereby each teacher agrees on certain days with the minimum of books. Secondly, make sure your child has a good bag. The ideal way to carry a heavy load is in a back pack or rucksack. But it **MUST** be well fitting. This means that it should have hip straps, and as much padding in the shoulder straps as is practical. The shoulder straps should be adjusted so that the bag can easily be put up on both shoulders when full but yet is not so loosely fitting that it slips when on the back. If a satchel is used, it must also have an adjustable strap. A single bag is not really advised unless it is going to be very light indeed. If hand held bags are going to be used at all, it is best to use 2 bags, one in each hand. This way, the weight is evenly spread. But no matter how good the bag, if it is not carried correctly, then the whole exercise is fruitless. See the pictures below for details. If your child does suffer from pains or aches as a result of heavy schoolbags, make sure you seek expert advice. Talk to your GP or consult your local Chartered Physiotherapist (look for MISCP after their name as a guarantee of a genuine medical qualification). You will find details in the Golden Pages.

**Emilie McGrath B Physio, MSc Sports Med, MISC
Chartered Physiotherapist**

© Emilie McGrath 2009