



Physiotherapists:
The Body Specialists

Physio Tips

**SAFE
BACK PACKS**

Physiotherapy Association of BC

BACK PACK WEIGHING YOU DOWN?

Physiotherapists advise the following tips when selecting and using backpacks to avoid back and arm injury:

Backpacks should have the following features:

- Made of lightweight materials, like canvas, to reduce the weight, and have lots of storage compartments to balance the weight of the contents throughout the entire pack. Place larger flat items closest to the back.
- Padded back – this feature will reduce pressure and prevent the pack's contents from digging into the back.
- Padded, contoured, adjustable shoulder and chest straps – to help reduce pressure and balance the weight.
- The shoulder straps should be adjusted so the bottom of the pack sits two inches above the waist.
- Waist belt or hip strap – to distribute some of the load to the pelvis. The waist belt sends the weight of the pack down through the legs which are more used to carrying weight, and it will maintain the central position keeping the pack closer to the back.
- Compression straps – on the sides or bottom of the backpack to help compress the contents of the backpack and stabilize the articles.
- Reflective material – for visibility to drivers at night.

Fitting the Back Pack:

- Centre the backpack between the shoulder blades using both shoulder straps.
- The backpack should be the right size for the person using it. A backpack should not be chosen for size 'to carry more'. The shoulder straps should fit comfortably and not dig in to the shoulders, allowing the arms to move freely; the bottom of the pack should rest in the contour of the lower back; and the pack should "sit" evenly in the middle of the back, not "sag down" toward the buttocks.

- Wear both shoulder straps to help distribute the weight of the pack evenly and to promote a good posture. Using only one strap loads the entire weight of the bag over one shoulder, resulting in back pain and strain to the neck and shoulders. Leaning forward may affect the natural curve in the lower back, and increase the curve of the upper back and shoulders.
- Keep the weight manageable. A full backpack should never weigh more than 15 per cent of the carriers' body weight. For example, someone weighing 115 lbs. (52 kg) should not carry more than 17 lbs. (7.8 kg), with the heaviest items stored closest to the back. Remember, carrying heavy loads incorrectly can lead to back strain or even chronic problems. These risks can be greatly increased in children and adolescents.
- Maintain a good posture at all times, standing tall with your head and neck aligned with your shoulders. Keeping your shoulders pulled gently back and down will help. As an exercise try utilizing this posture, gently squeezing your shoulder blades together and then rotate your palms to face outwards. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat five times.

Physiotherapists are experts in movement and mobility, body mechanics, muscles and joints. They will help develop an exercise program specially-tailored to your needs, putting together the right combination of activities to improve physical fitness and avoid injury.

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