Backpack Safety

Backpacks have become the most convenient and efficient way for students to carry their books and other personal items to school, as well as other places for social activities. Unfortunately, a recent study by the American Physical Therapy Association has found that more than 50% of children surveyed carry backpacks heavier than they should (see below). Also wearing a backpack on one shoulder can cause the child to lean to one side to compensate for the extra weight and can result in spinal asymmetry, back, neck or shoulder pain. In severe cases there can be nerve damage, which causes winging of the scapula. In fact, this winging phenomenon is now referred to as "backpack palsy". More than 9500 school-age children received medical treatment last year for injuries related to backpacks, and likely many more received medical treatment without the link to backpack use being realized.

As a result of our experience we have the following recommendations for safe use of backpacks:

- Carry no more than 15-20% of body weight in the backpack. This can be determined by weighing the child and the backpack separately

- Have your child clean out his/her backpack regularly by removing items that can be left at home or in a locker

- Use both shoulder straps to keep the weight better distributed. This will help promote good posture and minimize the chance of straining the shoulder, neck or back

- Pack heavier items low and toward the center

- Recognize signs that the backpack is too heavy. Pay attention to whether your child is slouching or leaning to one side when wearing a backpack, if he/she struggles when putting it on, or is experiencing any type of back or neck pain, tingling, or numbness in the shoulders or arms

- Select the proper backpack. Purchase a backpack of appropriate size for the size of your child, that has padded straps, and has multiple compartments so that the weight is more evenly distributed

- Teach your child to pick up the backpack properly, bending at the knees and grasping the backpack with both hands before putting it on