

# Healthy Lifestyles

by



Floyde Spencer

## You don't have to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders

Atlas is a well-known figure from Greek mythology. He was punished by Zeus and made to bear the weight of heaven and earth on his back. He had a brief respite from the punishment when he agreed to do some contract work for Hercules to collect the apples of Hesperides. Hercules took on the "weight of the worlds" and Atlas planned to leave it with him. Unfortunately for Atlas, the wily Hercules tricked him back into taking the world on his shoulders.

Many life lessons can be learned from the study of Greek myths, and September marks the beginning of that journey for young Canadians. For most of them it means carrying the weight of their school world on their shoulders. Most of that carrying occurs with a backpack.

Backpacks are one of the best ways to carry books, binders, laptops lunch and clothes for recreation. Few of us are aware of some of the potential risks associated with an overloaded poorly worn or inadequately designed backpack. Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to injury for a number of reasons.

Most children we see clinically have been affected by our current sedentary culture to such and extent enough postural strength in their body to support carrying the typical backpack loaded up for school. The results of this are often aches and pains in the shoulders, neck and back regions. Sometimes it results in buckling of the spine or a postural scoliosis. In other cases it may result in nerve problems causing tingling, numbness and muscle weakness. This is called "backpack palsy".

Various researchers

studying North American populations give us some sobering facts related to backpacks. Over 40 million students carry backpacks. Over half the children in another study regularly carried more than the recommended 15 percent of their body weight in their school backpacks. 58 percent of doctors polled in 1999 in Chicago reported treating children with back or shoulder pain attributable to carry backpacks.

Parents, teachers, medical professionals and administrators can all work together in teaching the next generation of students how to maintain a healthy body. Lifetime health practices are developed during the school age years. Physiotherapists advise that we follow these simple practices related to preventing backpack related injuries.

Live an active life. Being active develops strength and strength helps protect us from injury. Wall talk. Slouching and slumping may be cool but it will wreck your body.

Backpack total weight should be less than 15 percent of your total body weight. If you weigh 100 pounds, your backpack should weigh less than 15 pounds.

Don't hang the pack on one shoulder for long periods of time. Most packs these days have shoulder, chest and hip straps to spread the load around our skeleton.

We don't have to be like poor old Atlas and carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. Let's do our part and lighten the load on our students as they load up their minds for the future.

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For more information on backpacks and back pain, go to [www.physiotherapy.ca](http://www.physiotherapy.ca)

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