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Monday, April 2, 2012

PRESS RELEASE

THE HEAVY SCHOOL BAG YOUR CHILD CARRIES EVERYDAY MAY BE THE CAUSE OF HIS/HER CHRONIC BACK PAIN

Though seen as a convenient method of carrying books and other scholastic materials, including food items, schoolbags are believed to contribute to back and other muscle and bone problems in school going children.

A study conducted by researchers in the Department of Anatomy at Makerere University College of Health Sciences among five hundred and thirty two primary school pupils indicated that 88.2% of them reported having body pain especially in the neck shoulders and upper back, with lower back pain affecting close to 39% of them. This research also established that 30.8% of the pupils who were included in the study carried school bags which were way too heavy for their weight; more than the recommended limit of 10% of their body weights.

The research also established a close relationship between lower back pain and schoolbag type, the way the bag is carried, long duration of walking and the time spent sitting (while studying, watching TV, using computers etc) after school.

“Repeated carrying of heavy schoolbags leads to straining of both the muscles and ligaments of the back. Since these children’s bodies are rapidly growing this repeated straining could lead to structural damage by affecting the growing bones. From the research findings, we realize that this is a potentially serious health problem that is yet to be given its due attention”, said Dr. Erisa Mwaka Sabakaki, one of the researchers involved in this study.

Parents remain the best advocates for safety promotion and should represent the group most likely to help to significantly reduce the number of schoolbag related injuries by checking backpack weights and contents. The research shows that school children, schools and families are equally involved in determining the weight of schoolbags, and all could contribute to reducing it. Even then, studies have shown that parents seldom check the weight and contents of children’s schoolbags. Secondly, prevention strategies should also focus within the schools. If children are provided with lockers in which to keep their school bags and other scholastic materials while at school, a number of potential injuries may be averted. The study found that only 19% of the pupils studied had access to lockers at their schools.

Currently, many professional organizations are communicating virtually the same message: choose the right size schoolbag; pack well and empty out unnecessary items; wear straps on both shoulders; and carry less than 10% of your body weight.

The study team made the following recommendations;

1. Schools should provide lockers where school children can keep their scholastic materials. Schools should also have fully functional libraries where children can sit, read and also borrow text books instead of carrying them daily in their schoolbags.
2. In addition to teacher and classroom strategies, school children need to learn how to recognize when their schoolbag is too heavy. Key signs include if the child is struggling to put on or take off the schoolbag, moving while leaning forward and pain and/or tingling, burning or feeling of numbness, associated with wearing the schoolbag. Recommended schoolbags should be backpacks with features that fit the human body and designed to improve safety and comfort. Education on how to properly wear a backpack include instruction that backpacks should be worn close to the body over the strongest back muscles in the chest region of the back, with both shoulder straps. Additionally, materials in the backpack should be organized with the heaviest items in the backpack closest to the back, and contents should be limited to only those required for

- that day. Parents should check the bag contents and limit carrying of unnecessary materials; they should also set a limit on the reading hours at night.
3. Research on parents' perception on children's school bag contents and weights needs to be done since they are instrumental in regulation and determining the weight and contents of schoolbags.

These findings will be helpful in guiding policy and other interventions meant to protect children from carrying excessive loads that cause them injuries in their backs.

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