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# Uganda: Research - Bags Deform Children

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Overloaded backpacks carried by school children compromise their posture and may lead to future injuries of the spine, a study by Makerere University has revealed.

The study was meant to determine the prevalence of low back pain and describe its relationship with schoolbag use in pupils. It indicated that heavy backpacks can become a clinical problem in school-going children, if the weight carried in the packs is not decreased.

The authors of the study said children should not carry anything weighing more than 10% of their body weight.

"Repeated carrying of heavy schoolbags leads to straining of both the muscles and ligaments of the back. Since children's bodies grow rapidly, this repeated straining could lead to structural damage by affecting the growing bones," explained Dr. Erisa Sabakaki.

He made the presentation yesterday during Makerere University's monthly press briefing. Makerere's anatomy department, in their study, found out that 88.2% of the pupils in their study reported having back pains, especially in the neck and shoulders and upper back.

The study was done by Sabakaki and four other doctors. The research established that 30.8% of the pupils carried school bags which were too heavy for their body weight.

The research showed that there is a relationship between lower back pain and school bag type, the way the bag is carried, long duration of walking and the time spent sitting.

Backpacks were the most common type of schoolbag and younger children carried proportionally heavier bags.

Other types of bags included shoulder bags, racksacks, plastic bags and 15.5% had no schoolbags.

Urban pupils carried significantly heavier bags than the rural pupils.

Of those studied, 30.8% carried schoolbags which were more than the recommended 10% of their body weight. Only 19% had lockers at school.

Pupils reported the weights of their bags as being either medium (49.9%) or heavy (39.8%). The prevalence of lower back pain was 37.8%. The study involved 532 pupils from six primary schools (three in Kampala and three in Mbale, Namutumba and Luwero).

However, an orthopaedic surgeon, Dr. Nadumba Edward, says he registers few cases of children complaining of back pain or injuries to the spine. Nadumba noted that much as it is not right for children to carry heavy bags on their backs, he had not recently registered serious complications resulting from such situations.

A questionnaire was used to collect data on demographics, school bag use, past history of body pain, especially low back pain, after school activities.

Data was also collected on school bag use (including type and carrying method), school children's perceptions of bag weight and comfort while wearing the bag. The children were weighed using a digital scale.

Though seen as a convenient method of carrying books and other scholastic materials, doctors say heavy schoolbags contribute to back and other musculo-skeletal problems in school-going children.

Despite the fact that schoolbags are widely used in the country, there was no data describing the current use of schoolbags by pupils in Uganda.

The study recommends that schools provide learners with lockers where they can keep their scholastic materials.


Parents and teachers were also asked to encourage children not to carry heavy bags.

The study adds that there is need to carry out research on parents' perceptions on school-bag contents. Compiled by Conan Businge, Andrew Ssenyonga and Loy Nankya

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