

## Bags versus Backpacks

It is often difficult, inconvenient and counterproductive to completely avoid lifting and carrying. Lifting and carrying items is part of our day to day lives whether we are going to the shops, picking up our children, or carrying a bag around during the day. Hidden lifting and carrying tasks are also a big part of our working lives from bringing in the milk for the office to carrying paperwork or filling the photocopier. Also we now increasingly carry many items to and from work and between work locations such as laptop computers and paperwork. All this lifting and carrying can take its toll on our backs. It is therefore sensible to assess how we lift and carry rather than trying to avoid it all together.

There are rules and regulations that exist to protect people whose jobs involve manual handling, for example nurses who move patients, or construction workers who lift equipment. BackCare's website has more information on this at <http://www.backcare.org.uk/377/Rules--regulations.html>.

But what about the less obvious hidden lifting and carrying tasks? We often find ourselves carrying many items around in bags on a daily basis. BackCare would encourage you to be more aware of the hidden lifts you carry out every day and how the bag you use affects your back.

Bags come in many designs from tiny high-end handbags, cross-body bags, to functional rucksacks. All come in various sizes and colours to reflect our different tastes and while it is great to have so much choice in terms of style, it is important to also consider whether the bag you choose will be suitable for its purpose and whether it is back friendly.

### Case studies

#### Stephanie

"I've had back pain in the past and over the years I've adapted the way I do most things. When it comes to carrying stuff around I know what I need to do, I use a rucksack for my shopping and taking papers to recycle. But when it came to work I persisted with my favourite handbag, filling it to the brim with my lunch, or the marking I had taken home. It was overflowing and I knew I was walking with my right shoulder weighed down. It was making my back and neck ache but I just kept saying to myself it's not that far from the car park to my classroom".

#### Michael

"I work between two different offices and take my laptop. I used to use a laptop bag which I carried in my hand like a briefcase but when my new laptop was supplied it came with a rucksack style of bag. Not my choice in style but it's definitely better on the days when I have a load of paperwork to carry around too."

### Hidden lifting and carrying - What you can do?

Firstly, think about what you have to carry in your bag as part of your work. Even if you don't have a job that involves much manual handling or lifting you may still be doing a surprising amount of hidden lifting in the form of your bag.

If carrying files or a laptop between locations is part of your job consider the type of bag that you are using. A rucksack or backpack would be preferable to a handbag or a briefcase as it distributes the weight you are carrying more evenly.

Consider a rucksack with a waist strap. These are really helpful for heavy rucksacks if you will be carrying it for a long time. Across the body strap bags are also a better alternative to the traditional one shoulder bag as they distribute the weight better, are secure and leave both hands free.

Try not to overload your bag; carry a bag that weighs at a maximum 10% of your body weight. Two trips to the car would be better than pulling a back muscle trying to carry a load that is far too heavy.

If you are carrying heavier items or you have more items than would comfortably fill a backpack consider using an office trolley to pull rather than carry the items.

## Choosing a bag

BackCare, in partnership with Smart-E-Pants, have designed a new range of back packs that use a patented back panel to help you protect your back. The Active Back Pack has been designed as a school bag, but many adults also find it a comfortable day bag.

The Active Back Packs are designed to the specifications of back pain specialists; however, the following tips may also be useful when looking at other makes of rucksack.

### Look out for:

- ◆ Two wide padded straps; these will help to distribute the weight evenly and reduce the strain on the spine and shoulders
- ◆ Adjustable straps; you will be able to adjust these so you can wear the bag correctly, high enough to be in firm contact with the top of the spine, with the base resting on the buttocks
- ◆ A well padded back panel with curved lower edge; this will help prevent pressure on the lumbar spine and give lumbar support.

To make sure you get the benefits of using a backpack you should wear the straps on both shoulders. You will also need to think about how much you carry in the bag. The recommended maximum weight for children to carry is around 10% of their body weight, this principle can also be applied to the weight adults carry.

### Relevant Information:

BackCare WebPages on Active Back Packs

BackCare WebPages on rules and regulations in the workplace

<http://www.backcare.org.uk/6947/BackKind-Bags.html>