Why Does My Child Have Back Pain?

When you think of back pain, you typically think of an affliction that affects adults. According to the Archives of Internal Medicine, 80% of Americans will experience back pain at some point in their lives. But, in recent years, research has unearthed that it appears to be on the rise in children.

An article in the November 2020 issue of Pediatrics in Review noted that back pain in children is becoming more common. The researchers recommended that pediatricians spend more time accurately assessing and managing these concerns as they continue to grow in number.

Why are there more cases of back pain in kids?

According to Nathan H. Lebwohl, M.D., chief of spinal deformity surgery with the University of Miami Health System, there are several reasons.

One, he says, is the fact that both sedentary activity and obesity in children are also increasing.

"Childhood obesity is linked to structural changes in the spine that are associated with low back pain," he says. "Sedentary lifestyles and increased video game time have also been associated with this problem."

One study looked at the relationship between obesity and back pain in children. In this study, published in the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery, 83 patients between 13 and 20 years old were examined. Study participants who had some form of juvenile disc degeneration in their spines were significantly more likely to be...
overweight or obese.

Another factor that seems to play a role in pediatric back pain is the increasing use — and weight — of school backpacks. Recently, this has become a more significant issue as laptop computers and other heavy electronics are essential school supplies for many students.

In a study published in the journal Spine, researchers examined 1,126 children ages 12 to 18. The researchers found that all but four of the students regularly used backpacks, and 74% of the backpack users had back pain and other problems with their physical function.

Other factors can lead to back pain in children and teenagers, says Dr. Lebwohl. These include:

- A family history of back pain
- Stress, as well as other emotional or psychological issues
- Sports-specific overtraining, such as in pitchers or gymnasts
- Smoking

How can my child prevent getting back pain?

When you look at the list of potential causes of back pain, it's not surprising that it's a problem on the rise. Luckily, you can play a significant role in preserving your
children's back health by being proactive about it.

Regular exercise, eating a healthy diet, and limiting screen time all help increase your child's activity and minimize weight gain. Smoking is a wrong choice for many reasons, particularly for children. Look to include balance in your child's sports training routine. You can speak with your children's coaches if you think their training might be leading to health problems.

Some backpack use is unavoidable for most kids, but parents should help lighten the load whenever possible. "Current recommendations are that backpack weight be restricted to less than 15% of body weight, and preferably less than 10%," says Dr. Lebwohl.

**Be your child's advocate**

Finally, Dr. Lebwohl says that parents need to try to recognize problems as they arise and speak up for their children's health concerns.

"Most cases of back pain in children are not caused by serious problems and respond to exercise and postural correction," he says. "See the doctor if your child is limping, complains of numbness or weakness in the legs, has a fever or rash, begins bedwetting, or has trouble sleeping because of pain. If you are concerned about your child's posture, evaluation by a trained observer to identify round-back and scoliosis problems is important so that they can be treated early. If you're not sure, look for an asymmetry of their waist or shoulder when standing, or an asymmetry of their back or excessive roundness when bending forward."

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.
When should I speak to my daughter about her pelvic health?

“Many girls are shy, but especially younger teens,” when it comes to talking to parents about their bodies, says Judy Simms-Cendan, M.D., a gynecologist specializing in pediatric and adolescent care with the University of Miami Health System. “Sometimes teens really don’t want to talk, so finding the right time and place to have those conversations is key.” Read more.