

REPRODUCTIVE HAZARDS IN THE WORKPLACE

A fact sheet for healthcare workers

Working in healthcare poses many health and safety risks to workers, including those caused by long hours on one's feet, heavy lifting, repetitive motion, exposure to hazardous chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and infectious diseases.

Many of these hazards create an even greater risk to workers who are pregnant or breast-feeding, or even to those planning to conceive.

Long Hours and Shift Work

- Excessive fatigue can lead to reproductive difficulty in both men and women.
- Frequent bathroom breaks must be allowed for pregnant women.
- Prolonged standing can cause miscarriage or premature birth.

Heavy Lifting During Pregnancy

Patient handling is one of the biggest safety hazards faced by all healthcare workers. Using proper technique while lifting and repositioning patients is extremely challenging, and given the weight of most patients, manual lifting must be avoided when possible.

During pregnancy, changes in ligaments and in your center of gravity can make you more prone to injury. This makes heavy lifting particularly hazardous, as it can lead to injury of the pregnant woman, miscarriage, or premature birth.

There are some published guidelines for lifting, including those in the links below. You should talk to your healthcare provider about appropriate limits for lifting during your pregnancy.

English: blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/files2013/05/ClinicalGuidelinesImg-NewLogoFinal.jpg

Spanish: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/images/MaternalLiftingInfographic-sp.jpg

Hazardous Drugs

Pharmaceuticals include some of the most hazardous chemicals that healthcare workers are exposed to at work. Those that are cytotoxic (toxic to cells) are particularly hazardous to the male and female reproductive system and to a developing fetus. If you are planning to conceive or are pregnant, you should not be exposed to these drugs, and some employers will allow you to opt out of administering hazardous drugs. In addition, personal protective equipment, such as gloves and respirators, may be required for all employees administering and/or handling hazardous drugs. Ask your employer about how they will protect you from exposure during this time.

Radiation

Ionizing radiation is a known reproductive hazard that causes birth defects and other reproductive problems in both women and men. Exposures in



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healthcare include X-rays and radioisotopes used as treatments, such as iodine-131. Whenever possible, you should avoid radiation exposure when you are pregnant or planning to conceive. Pregnant workers have a lower allowable radiation dose, so if you must continue to work with radiation, you should let your radiation safety officer know that you are pregnant.

Sterilants

High-level chemical disinfectants and sterilants used in the healthcare industry are also known to have an effect on pregnancy outcome. These chemicals include ethylene oxide gas, glutaraldehyde, peracetic acid, and formaldehyde and should not be used by pregnant workers without controls that sufficiently reduce exposure.

Cleaning Products and Disinfectants

Cleaning products are one of the largest sources of chemical exposure to workers in the United States, and this is especially true in healthcare facilities due to infection control procedures. Many cleaners and disinfectants, such as quaternary ammonium compounds, are reproductive health hazards, and exposure to pregnant women should be minimized. Labels and SDSs do not always provide much information about the reproductive health hazards of these chemicals. Another source of information is ChemHAT, an online database that you can search for hazard information and suggestions for safer alternatives. When you go to chemhat.org, you can search by chemical name, and a page with statements about the chemical's hazards will come up. The symbols

and statements at the bottom of this page are examples of what might come up for something that is a reproductive health hazard. ChemHAT includes hazard information about chemicals that may cause harm through breast milk.

Infectious Diseases

All healthcare workers have potential exposure to infectious diseases in the workplace, particularly those providing direct care to patients with these illnesses. Some infectious diseases, including Chicken Pox, Rubella, HIV, and Hepatitis, provide much greater risk to pregnant women and their unborn children. You should not care for patients with these illnesses while pregnant. See www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/infectious.html for a list of specific diseases posing a reproductive health hazard and how you can protect yourself. Pregnant people are at increased risk for serious illness from COVID-19, and COVID-19 infection increases the risk of preterm birth. See the current OSHA guidance on protecting workers from COVID-19 at: www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework#what-workers-need-to-know.

Protecting Yourself and Your Family

- If you are planning to have children, it is best to talk with your employer about the hazards in the workplace that might affect your ability to conceive or harm your child. If you feel comfortable, ask your employer, labor representative, or your company's safety officer about the types of hazards for your specific job tasks and how you can stay safe while doing your job.



Birth Defects—can cause harm to the developing child, including birth defects, low birth weight, and biological or behavioral problems that appear as the child grows.



Gene Damage—can cause or increase the rate of mutations, which are changes in genetic material in cells.



Reproductive Harm—can disrupt the male or female reproductive systems, changing sexual development, behavior or functions, decreasing fertility, or resulting in loss of the fetus during pregnancy.



Endocrine Disruption—can interfere with hormone communication between cells, which controls metabolism, development, growth, reproduction and behavior (the endocrine system).

- If you work with chemicals, your employer is required to make Safety Data Sheets (SDSs) for all chemicals available to you on site. Many SDSs are also posted on the product manufacturer's website, and are helpful if you want to identify reproductive chemical hazards in your workplace. The SDSs will describe the hazards of the chemicals and how to use them safely. Although SDSs use scientific terms, recent changes to the Hazard Communication standard have made SDSs easier to understand. Product manufacturers must identify hazards on SDSs using pictograms. Although there is no specific pictogram for reproductive hazards, the pictogram for health hazard would be on the SDS and the product label along with one of the following hazard statements:



May damage fertility or the unborn child

Suspected of damaging fertility or the unborn child

May cause harm to breast-fed children

- Ask your employer if you can use cleaning and disinfecting products that contain the US EPA's Safer Choice and Design for the Environment labels.
- Use the UW DEOHS Reproductive Health Toolkit to learn more about how work can affect your ability to have healthy children.
deohs.washington.edu/pehsu/occrepro
- If the company has done testing to evaluate workplace hazards (e.g., measuring the concentration of chemicals in the air), this may mean that higher exposures are likely. You have a right to see the results of the measurements and should share them with your healthcare provider.
- Provide any information you get from your employer to your healthcare provider and discuss the risks of your work.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE is equipment worn by workers to protect them from hazards in the workplace and includes gloves, protective clothing, safety glasses, earplugs,

and respirators. PPE has a lot of limitations and should only be required for protection from hazards in the workplace that cannot be controlled using more effective strategies, such as substitution, ventilation, barriers, safety procedures, etc. Sometimes, however, PPE is required of all workers in order to minimize exposure to a hazard. Even when PPE is not required for all exposed workers, PPE might be necessary to protect workers who are pregnant or planning to conceive. If you are required to wear a respirator at work, your employer must have a respiratory protection program that includes a medical evaluation to make sure you can safely wear a respirator, fit testing, and training on the use and care of your respirator. Your employer may also allow you to wear a respirator even if it is not required, and if so, they must still ensure that you can wear it safely. During pregnancy, you may need a different size respirator or other PPE due to changes in body weight and shape.

Your Rights

Your employer must protect the health and safety of all employees (and their clinicians) under the OSHA Act—even those most vulnerable. Health and safety programs, including required exposure monitoring and most personal protective equipment, must be provided free of charge.

It is illegal for your employer to discriminate against you because of pregnancy, childbirth, or a medical condition related to childbirth. For more information about your rights, visit [www.eeoc.gov/pregnancy-discrimination#:~:text=The%20Pregnancy%20Discrimination%20Act%20\(PDA,term%20or%20condition%20of%20employment](http://www.eeoc.gov/pregnancy-discrimination#:~:text=The%20Pregnancy%20Discrimination%20Act%20(PDA,term%20or%20condition%20of%20employment).

The Center for WorkLife Law's free legal hotline provides information to employees about their legal rights. Email hotline@worklifelaw.org www.pregnantatwork.org/about/ Call 415-703-8276



Photo: Courtesy of Dominique Atherly

