

REPRODUCTIVE HAZARDS IN THE WORKPLACE

A fact sheet for workers

Hazards associated with your work may affect your ability to conceive or harm your unborn fetus. Certain workplace exposures and tasks are of special concern when you are planning to conceive and when you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Not all chemicals harm the fetus or the reproductive system, but exposure to sufficient amounts of certain chemicals may pose additional risks during childbearing years. This is why it is important to find out about the chemicals you use at work and how to reduce your exposure to safe levels before starting a family. This is not just about pregnant workers—there are hazards that can increase the risk of reproductive problems in all exposed workers.

All workers have a right to a safe and healthy workplace—even during their childbearing years. This fact sheet is designed to help you recognize those hazards and protect yourself and your children from them.

Before Conception

Some exposures at work, including stress or shift work, can affect a couple's ability to conceive. It is also important to note that if you are exposed to certain hazardous chemicals before conception, they may remain in your body for quite some time and can have an effect on your developing child even if you are not exposed during pregnancy. For more information (in English and Spanish) about women's fertility, go to: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/women'sWorkplace.html.

Workplace exposures can also affect sperm production. These include chemicals (e.g., lead), infectious agents, excessive heat, and radiation. Exposure to any of these hazards at work may reduce the likelihood that you will conceive. Go to www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/mensworkplace.html for more information (in English and Spanish) about men's reproductive hazards.

During Pregnancy

Some toxic substances that are in your body during pregnancy may be toxic for your child—even if your exposure is low. This may lead to miscarriage, preterm birth, or problems with your child's development. In addition, heavy lifting, long periods of standing or sitting, chemicals, and pesticide might also lead to miscarriage or preterm birth. During this time, it is important to talk to both your employer and your doctor about the hazards of your job. In addition, your union



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or worker advocate may also have relevant safety information about the hazards at work. Pregnancy is not an illness, and there are laws and regulations that protect you from retaliation or discrimination by your employer if you ask for protection or accommodation during this time. Your doctor can help you by writing a letter requesting accommodation. Workers whose partners are pregnant should also be very careful not to expose their partners to toxic materials brought home on their clothing, skin, or hair. See our reproductive hazards checklist at <https://deohs.washington.edu/pehsu/occrepro>. For more information (in English and Spanish), go to: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/takeHome.html.

While Breastfeeding

Some toxic substances, such as lead, solvents, pesticides, and flame retardants, can make their way from a woman's blood into her breast milk where they are passed on to the baby. Because the baby is so small, this can be a significant exposure. While you are breastfeeding, be sure to talk to your doctor, employer, and labor representative, if you are comfortable, about any exposures of concern. Go to www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/breastfeeding.html for more information (in English and Spanish).

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.
- 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 following pictogram for a chronic health hazard should be on the SDS and the product label along with one of the associated 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 with the US EPA's Safer Choice and Design for the Environment labels.
- Use this fact sheet and the resources listed at the end of this fact sheet to learn more about how work can affect your ability to have healthy children.
- 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 controls, such as substitution, ventilation, barriers, safety procedures, etc. Sometimes, however, PPE is required of all workers in order to minimize exposure to a hazard, and even when it is not required for all exposed workers, PPE might be necessary to protect the 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 they do, they must still ensure that you can wear it safely. Remember that 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 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. Go to [www.eoc.gov/pregnancy-discrimination#:~:text=The%20Pregnancy%20Discrimination%20Act%20\(PDA,term%20or%20condition%20of%20employment](http://www.eoc.gov/pregnancy-discrimination#:~:text=The%20Pregnancy%20Discrimination%20Act%20(PDA,term%20or%20condition%20of%20employment) for more information about your rights.

The Center for WorkLife Law's free legal hotline provides information to employees (and their clinicians) about their legal rights:

Email hotline@worklifelaw.org

Call 415-703-8276

www.pregnantatwork.org/about/

Resources

OSHA Reproductive Hazards Topic

www.osha.gov/reproductive-hazards

NIOSH Reproductive Health and the Workplace

www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/default.html

NIOSH Search by Job to learn more about

hazards: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/jobhazardexamples.html

The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978

www.eoc.gov/statutes/pregnancy-discrimination-act-1978

UW DEOHS Reproductive Health Toolkit:

deohs.washington.edu/pehsu/occrepro

Washington Law Against Discrimination

apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.asp?cite=49.60.030

Washington Workplace Pregnancy Accommodation Law:

apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=43.10.005

Fact Sheets on Pregnant Workers' Rights in Washington State:

English: agportal-s3bucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploadedfiles/Another/News/Press_Releases/PregAccomGuide_v12_Eng.pdf

Spanish: agportal-s3bucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploadedfiles/Another/News/Press_Releases/PregAccomGuide_v12_Esp_2.4.21.pdf

Mother to Baby Fact Sheets by Category of Exposure: mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/

ChemHAT—a searchable database designed by workers with information about the hazards of chemicals in the workplace, including effects on fertility and on children of exposed mothers. chemhat.org



Photo: Michael Sellitti

