

# Health & Safety for Pregnant Workers

## Is it safe to keep working while pregnant?

Work is usually safe for women during a healthy pregnancy. Continuing to work can also be good for your health. You may feel healthier if you are busy and productive. Your wages can provide you with financial security to plan for your new family, and you may have access to health benefits and support from your coworkers.

Yet some jobs can put your health and the health of your unborn baby at risk. Many of these jobs can be changed to reduce these health risks.

## What can affect my health or the health of my baby?

**Chemicals** — Some chemicals can cause miscarriage, birth defects and other problems during pregnancy.

You can . . .

- ✓ Learn about the chemicals you work with. Check the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) at your workplace.
- ✓ Follow any safety guidelines recommended
- ✓ Use protective clothing and equipment.
- ✓ Avoid coming into contact with chemicals if possible.
- ✓ Wash your hands before eating.
- ✓ Ask to be transferred to a different work area or position temporarily.

**Infectious Diseases** — If you work in health care or with children or animals, you are more likely to be exposed to infectious diseases. Infections caused by a virus, bacteria, fungus or parasite can cause birth defects, miscarriage and other problems in your unborn baby.

You can . . .

- ✓ Make sure you are immunized before pregnancy
- ✓ Wash your hands often
- ✓ Talk to your health care provider if you

come into contact with someone who has an infectious disease such as chicken pox, measles, hepatitis or tuberculosis.

**Standing** — Standing for more than four hours without a break can affect the blood flow to your baby.

You can . . .

- ✓ Avoid standing for long periods of time
- ✓ Take short walks several times a day
- ✓ Use a chair or stool
- ✓ Take regular breaks and put your feet up
- ✓ Wear comfortable shoes

**Sitting** — Sitting for more than four hours can reduce blood flow and increase fluid in your legs and feet. Sitting for a long time can also cause muscle strain in your lower back and tension in your neck and shoulders.

You can . . .

- ✓ Sit in a comfortable, well-designed chair
- ✓ Take short walks several times a day.
- ✓ Use a footstool at your desk and change the position of your feet often
- ✓ Use a cushion to support your lower back
- ✓ Avoid crossing your legs and feet
- ✓ Change positions often



**Lifting & other heavy work** — If your job involves lifting, pushing and pulling, you have an increased risk of having problems during your pregnancy.

You can . . .

- ✓ Avoid heavy lifting and reduce repetitive lifting to loads of less than 25 pounds after 24 weeks of pregnancy
- ✓ If you must lift, bend your knees and keep your back straight
- ✓ Reduce repetitive climbing of ladders or stairs after 20 weeks of pregnancy
- ✓ Alternate heavy work with less tiring work
- ✓ Rest with your feet up

**Shiftwork** — Working shifts and long hours can cause miscarriage or can cause a baby to be born too soon or too small.

**You can. . .**

- ✓ Take short breaks whenever you need them, at least every two hours
- ✓ Stretch if you have been sitting
- ✓ Rest if you have been standing
- ✓ Ask for a day shift

**Stress** — High levels of stress from work can increase your risk of problems during pregnancy and may cause a baby to be born too soon or too small.

**You can. . .**

- ✓ Try to identify the cause of stress
- ✓ Reduce the things that cause stress if possible
- ✓ Ask to work fewer hours
- ✓ Ask friends and family to help with household work
- ✓ Talk to a counsellor or use your Employee Assistance Plan if available

**Noise** — Loud noise can cause your baby to be born too soon or cause hearing loss in your unborn baby. Make sure to avoid working for long periods with loud noise.

**Heat** — Extreme heat is hard on you and your baby. Avoid working for long periods in very hot temperatures. Protect yourself from the sun if you work outside. Take regular breaks and drink plenty of fluids when working in the heat.

**Radiation** — Radiation from x-rays and other sources can cause your baby to be born too soon or with birth defects. There is no evidence that the type of radiation from computer screens will harm your baby. Follow proper safety procedures if you work with radiation. Avoid contact with patients who are being treated with radioactive isotopes. Avoid holding patients during x-rays.

## What can your employer do?

In Manitoba, employers are legally responsible to inform pregnant or nursing workers of any risk in the workplace to you or your unborn or nursing child. An employer must take steps to reduce the risk or assign you to alternative work if you are pregnant or nursing.

Your employer can create a healthy workplace for pregnant workers in the following ways:

- ✓ inform pregnant women about the risks of working with all chemicals in the workplace and encourage them to check Material Safety Data Sheets
- ✓ provide appropriate personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks, and clothing
- ✓ make sure uniforms and protective clothing fit pregnant women
- ✓ make sure the workplace has good ventilation, and safe temperature and noise levels
- ✓ offer light duty and alternative work assignments
- ✓ offer flexible hours, part-time work, job sharing and working from home options
- ✓ provide workers with frequent short breaks
- ✓ assign special parking for pregnant women
- ✓ provide counselling services such as Employee Assistance Plans
- ✓ provide wage top-ups during parental leave

### Pregnancy Discrimination

The Manitoba Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination against workers because of pregnancy. You cannot be fired, demoted or denied professional opportunities because you are pregnant. You also have the right to return to your former position when you return from maternity leave.

Your employer is required to accommodate the special needs of pregnant workers in ways such as:

- temporary relocation to another workstation
- temporary alternative duties
- flexible schedule to accommodate medical appointments
- more frequent breaks

## What can you do?

Talk to your health care provider about your job and how it might affect your health and the health of your baby.

Share this fact sheet with your workplace health and safety committee. They may be able to help make sure your job is safe for you during your pregnancy.

For further information contact us at 949-0811 or Fax 1-204-956-0848 or email at [mflohc@mflohc.mb.ca](mailto:mflohc@mflohc.mb.ca)

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