Reproductive Hazards of the Workplace – Tips for Job Safety

This sheet talks about possible exposures at work during pregnancy or breastfeeding and ways to lower your risk. This information is based on published research studies. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What types of hazards could be in the workplace?

This fact sheet highlights chemicals and metals; however, there are many types of workplace hazards. Other workplace hazards include anesthetic gases, ionizing radiation, loud noise, extreme heat or extreme cold stress, strenuous physical exertion (heavy lifting), repetitive movements, whole body vibration, infectious agents, injury/trauma, emotional stress and changing shift rotations.

Sometimes, workers carry hazardous substances (dust, powder, chemicals, metal flakes) home on their skin, hair, shoes, or clothing. Because of this, it is also important to talk to your partner or other adults living in your home about their workplace hazards.

In general, exposures can happen through inhaling substances (breathing gas, powder, dust, or vapor into your lungs), absorption through skin, or ingestion (eating or drinking).

How can workplace exposures affect my health?

For many possible workplace exposures, studies have not been done to see if or how they might affect fertility (ability to get pregnant) or pregnancy. However, workplace exposures might affect other areas of health, such as asthma, allergic reactions, or cancer. For this reason, it is appropriate for all workers to safeguard their health in the workplace, even if they are not pregnant or cannot become pregnant.

How can I learn more about chemicals in my workplace?

The best way to find out what chemicals are in the product(s) you use, or products that are used around you, is to get a copy of the Safety Data Sheets (SDS) for that product. The workplace is required to make sure that SDS are available and easy to find for all chemicals/products used at a worksite. The SDS provide information about the hazard of a chemical or product and describe how to properly handle and store chemicals used at your workplace. However, most SDS do not provide helpful information about reproductive risks, because the sheets do cannot account for the amount (level, time) of exposure. Many chemicals in the workplace have not been studied to see if they can affect fertility, pregnancy, or breastfeeding.

It is helpful to remember that even though a potentially harmful substance or condition may be present at your worksite, it does not mean that you are at risk of exposure. In addition, smelling an odor does not mean you have had a significant exposure. By following proper safety and handling procedures, exposures will likely be kept below levels that would affect your health or pregnancy.

How can I reduce my exposure to potential hazards in my workplace?

Consider talking with an occupational health specialist or industrial hygienist who may be able to provide information that is specific to your workplace.

Employers are responsible for making sure the workplace is safe for all workers. If there are concerns about safety at work, you might consider discussing the following with your workplace:

- Substitution: Is there a safer chemical that can be substituted for the one of concern?
- Local Exhaust: Can a local exhaust be used to reduce exposure? (e.g., fume hoods)

In addition, some good basic protective measures for any worker are outlined below:

- If eating at the workplace:
- Do not eat or drink at a workstation. Eat only in designated eating areas.
- Wash your hands well before you eat or drink; and
- Store your food and drinks in a refrigerator that is only for food.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Do not smoke at work. If you smoke, wash your hands before and after having a cigarette to prevent breathing in or swallowing chemicals that you might have on your hands.
- If you are exposed to dust or powders at work, consider having another set of clothes and shoes that can stay at work. This way, you can wear clean clothes and shoes at home. Ask if your employer can provide work clothing that can be laundered at the worksite. If you must bring your work clothes home to be washed, keep them separate from your family's laundry.
- If your job requires you to sit or stand for long periods of time, take regular short breaks of about 5-10 minutes every 2 hours. Change your position by sitting or taking a walk.
- Make sure that harmful waste or trash is disposed of properly in containers with lids. Make sure the lids are tightly closed on the containers when not in use.
- If there is a chemical spill or leak, follow the proper safety procedures, as outlined by your employer and the SDS, to clean the area. Consider passing this responsibility to another coworker and/or staying away from the area until the cleaning is done.
- Make sure all your immunizations are up to date.

What kind of safety protection can be used?

All workplaces should provide the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for handling and working around hazardous situations. Some examples of protective equipment include gloves, shoes, aprons, gowns, ear protection, hoods, or masks.

- Use what is available and required for your job.
- Always use protective equipment, not just when pregnant.
- Keep your training on how to properly use the PPE up to date.

- Make sure hoods, respirators, and other equipment are working properly or have been properly maintained / inspected.

- Ensure all hoods, respirators and other equipment are cleaned both regularly and properly.

- If you wear protective equipment (such as a respirator), be sure it fits correctly. As the body changes during pregnancy, protective equipment may need to be re-fitted.

- If you wear a respirator, remember that respirators are not a substitute for appropriate permanent exhaust ventilation (such as fume hoods, exhaust ducts, and/or exhaust fans). Respirators are designed to be used only for a short period of time.

- If the right protective equipment is not currently at your worksite, ask your employer about getting it.

What if I am feeling sick while at work?

If you are having health problems, or health problems become worse while at your workplace, tell your healthcare provider. You and your employer can consult with an industrial hygienist, who can make sure that the proper protective equipment is in place and is working properly.

What should I tell my health care provider about my workplace?

When getting ready to discuss concerns about workplace exposures with your healthcare providers, a MotherToBaby expert, or an industrial hygienist, gathering some information ahead of time will be helpful. Have a list of the chemicals that you work with or are around. Bring a copy of the product label and SDS. Write down how you work with the exposure of concern, the amount of time you work with it, and how you protect yourself. You can also consider having these conversations before you get pregnant.

In addition, discuss what your typical day at work is like, and if you have a changing shift schedule. Describe duties such as heavy lifting, or if you may be around radiation or loud noises. Discuss all your jobs if you have more than one job. Also discuss hobbies, such as art or jewelry making, which could lead to exposure to hazards.

What if I am still breastfeeding when I go back to work?

Some chemicals can get into breast milk and possibly harm a baby. These include lead and other heavy metals and some radioactive isotopes used in hospitals for radiation therapy. If you need to pump and store milk at your workplace, use a clean room to pump. Always wash your hands before handing your breast pump equipment and milk storage containers. If you are using a work refrigerator to store the expressed milk, make sure it is one that is only for workers to store their food. Continue following safe work practices to reduce exposure to potential hazards. If you have concerns about breastfeeding, talk to your healthcare provider.

Where can I get more information?

Contact MotherToBaby to find a service that may be able to provide you with information. Some worksites have safety officers who may be able to help you learn if you are using the correct protections. You can also contact an industrial hygienist or occupational medicine specialist outside your place of employment; try looking for them at a local medical university. Industrial hygienists should be able to provide an independent assessment of ways to improve the safety of your job, if needed; and may be able to give advice on how to work with employers in implementing these changes. If you need to find a SDS, most are available through the internet. If you do not have access to the internet, try your local library for internet access.

If you are a member of a union or professional organization, you may consider talking with them or directly to your employer. Within these groups, there might already be negotiated rules for pregnant workers that can be different

than those set by the government. These negotiated rules for pregnant workers might not be based on any known risks, but they may be stricter because of the process of previous negotiations.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has a free service called Health Hazard Evaluation (HHE), which can provide you or your employer advice about health hazards that might be in your workplace and can offer tips on how to make your workplace safer. To learn more, visit the NIOSH website at: https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/.

Below is a list of other resources that may be helpful:

- American Industrial Hygiene Association: https://www.aiha.org/about-ih/Pages/Find-an-Industrial-Hygienist.aspx.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/index.html.
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA): https://www.osha.gov or 800-321-OSHA.

Please click here for references.

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