



THIS FACTSHEET IS PART OF THE **MOTHERS AT WORK SERIES**

# Hazards which may affect the health and safety of new or expectant mothers

## Physical risks

### Movements and postures

A variety of factors may be involved, including pace of work, rest breaks, suitability of equipment and the work space itself. Hormonal changes during and after pregnancy can affect the ligaments, increasing chances of injury.

- Standing may lead to dizziness, faintness and fatigue. It can also contribute to an increased risk of premature childbirth and miscarriage.
- Sitting for long periods increases risk of thrombosis. Backache can be associated with long periods of sitting or standing.
- Confined space may lead to awkward postures and strain or sprain injuries particularly in the latter stages of pregnancy.

### Manual handling

Pregnant workers are especially at risk from manual handling injuries due to hormonal changes. Postural problems may increase as the pregnancy progresses. There can be risks for those who have recently given birth, eg after a Caesarean section. Breastfeeding mothers may

experience discomfort due to increased breast size and sensitivity.

### Shocks, jolts and vibrations

Regular exposure to these eg driving or riding in off-road vehicles, or excessive movement, may increase the risk of miscarriage.

### Noise

Prolonged exposure to loud noise may lead to increased blood pressure or tiredness.

### Ionising and non-ionising radiation

Significant exposure to ionising radiation can be harmful to the unborn child. For details of the value which should not be exceeded in pregnancy see 'Working safely with ionising radiation: Guidelines for expectant and breastfeeding mothers' HSE.

If the work involves:

- radioactive materials
- optical radiation
- electromagnetic fields and waves
- working in compressed air
- diving
- underground mining work

See 'New and expectant mothers at work: A guide for employers'

HSE 2002 for further details of these risks and related legislation.

## Biological agents

### Infectious diseases

Many biological agents can affect the unborn child if the mother is affected during pregnancy, or through breastfeeding or close physical contact. Examples are:

- hepatitis B
- HIV (the AIDS virus)
- herpes
- TB
- syphilis
- chickenpox
- typhoid
- rubella
- toxoplasma



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In certain occupations exposure to infections is more likely. For example:

- laboratory work
- health care
- looking after animals
- dealing with meat products

## Chemical agents

Chemical agents may enter the body through different pathways: inhalation, ingestion, cuts and abrasions, and through the skin. There are a number of substances that may cause harm to the unborn child. See 'New and expectant mothers at work: A guide for employers' HSE 2002 and 'COSHH: A brief guide to the regulations', HSE.

Other substances which could have adverse effects on the unborn child:

- Mercury and mercury derivatives
- Antimitotic drugs
- Some pesticides
- Carbon monoxide

## Lead and lead derivatives

The exposure of pregnant and breastfeeding women to lead is specifically prohibited under Article 6 of the European Directive (92/85/EEC). Once their pregnancy is confirmed, women will normally be suspended from any work which exposes them significantly to lead.

## Working conditions

### Facilities

- Rest (both physical and mental) is important for new and expectant mothers.

- Easy access to toilets (and associated hygiene facilities) is essential, to protect against significant risks of infection and kidney disease.
- Need access to appropriate storage facilities for breastfeeding mothers to safely express and store breast milk.

### Working hours

Long working hours, irregular and late shifts and night work can have a significant effect on the health of pregnant women and can disrupt breastfeeding.

### Occupational Stress

New and expectant mothers can be vulnerable to stress because of hormonal, physiological and psychological changes which occur during and after pregnancy. Additional stress may occur if a woman is anxious about her pregnancy or its outcome.

### Passive smoking

The effects of passive smoking are known to affect the heart and lungs and to pose a risk to infant health.

### Extremes of cold and heat

Pregnant women are less able to tolerate heat or extreme cold. Sudden changes in temperature can increase the risks.

### Work with visual screen equipment (VDU's)

Past concern about reports of miscarriages and birth defects has not been borne out by recent research. Taken as a whole, studies do not show any link between miscarriages or birth defects and working with VDUs.

When **working alone** pregnant women may need access to communications in case they need urgent medical attention.

**Working at heights** such as on ladders or platforms is hazardous for pregnant women.

**Work-related violence** or the fear of violence can increase the risk of miscarriage, premature birth and problems with breast-feeding.

**Work equipment and personal protective equipment** is not generally designed for use by pregnant women. Physical changes may make it uncomfortable to wear or it may not provide the intended protection.

This fact sheet draws from 'New and expectant mothers at work: A guide for employers' HSE 2002.

## Useful information

1. *New and expectant mothers at work: A guide for employers* HSE 2002.
2. *Getting to grips with manual handling: A short guide for employers*
3. *Infection risks to new and expectant mothers in the workplace: A guide for employers, 1997*
4. *Working safely with ionising radiation: Guidelines for expectant or breastfeeding women, 2001*
5. *Health and safety of new and expectant mothers in the catering industry, 2001*

All available from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) infoline 0845 3450055 or [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)