

Chapter 22

Women's health and safety



Women and men often do different types of jobs - that means a difference in the exposure to different risks. Sometimes the difference is related to biology, but often it is not.

For example:

- Safety gear is often designed for men not women
- Risk assessments often don't consider the differences in sizes between different groups of workers
- Women of child bearing age, pregnant women, nursing mothers or those who have recently given birth are at greater risk from specific work hazards
- Pregnant women may need some change in ergonomics of work as their centre of gravity changes which can create greater strain on lower back
- Pregnant women also undergo physiological changes (e.g. changes in breathing) that can increase the risk of injury. The developing baby is also at risk at certain times.
- Access to toilet breaks and good facilities is very important for women.

Protecting everyone

The approach to protecting women's health and safety is the approach that protects all workers – we must never compromise any workers' health and safety because of their personal characteristics – that's discrimination.

Things to consider include:

- When assessing risks make sure all workers are considered
- Involve all workers, not just the majority

22. Women's health and safety

- Encourage everyone to report all incidents including violence, bullying and harassment. Some groups of workers may feel they will not be taken seriously. This is unacceptable. Work needs to be healthy and safe for all.
- Encourage all workers to be a HSR or health and safety committee member - mentoring is a great way to improve activism on the job.

Violence, sexual harassment and bullying

Violence, sexual harassment and bullying are hazards that can affect many members. But women are more likely to work in areas where the risk of violence, harassment or bullying is higher.

Violence at work is not acceptable. Employers have legal duties to prevent violence, harassment and bullying of employees. See chapter on Bullying and Harassment.

Hazardous manual handling

Women are less likely to be able to rest when they get home, because they still do the bulk of home duties. These may repeat the repetitive movements that they perform at work. Frequent rest breaks, slowing the pace of work and redesigning the equipment or work process all help to avoid strain injuries.

Hazardous substances

Many women workers encounter hazardous substances at work. Problems caused by using hazardous chemicals include dermatitis, asthma, reproductive disorders and potentially increased cancer risk.

Hazards with additional effects on pregnant women and/or developing baby

Hazard	Work	Additional effect on pregnant woman and/or foetus
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome	Assembly line workers, computer operators	Inflammation of wrist from repetitive work causes pain in median nerve; water retention in pregnancy makes the problem worse.
Ionizing radiation (X Rays, gamma rays)	lab technicians, atomic workers	Infertility; miscarriages, stillbirths, gene mutations, direct damage to foetus, such as death, mental retardation, birth defects and increased incidence of childhood cancer, such as leukaemia.

Hazard	Work	Additional effect on pregnant woman and/or foetus
Non-ionizing radiation (e.g. Microwaves)	Food service workers, radio, navigation and radar communication workers	Changes in menstrual cycle; miscarriages; retarded foetal development, birth defects, such as club foot and Down's Syndrome, decreased lactation in nursing mothers.
Heat, cold	Workers in bakeries, canneries, fish plants, laundries, factories, foundries, smelters	Decreased fertility, increased embryo death, low birth weight.
Noise and vibration	Machine and motor vehicle operators; miners, airline workers; assembly line workers, riveters, pneumatic drill operators	Congestion of the veins (e.g. Varicose veins), especially during menstruation and pregnancy; menstrual cycle disturbances, reduced fertility, increased premature births, abnormal labour, and perinatal mortality; exposure to high noise levels during pregnancy may cause hearing loss in child.
Strenuous physical labour such as heavy lifting, repetitive lifting of more than 10kg., handling heavy loads, frequent bending/stretching, prolonged standing (more than three hours per shift) or sitting in same position	Many types of work, including but not limited to material handling, factory work, health care, hospitality, retail	Increased susceptibility to hypertension, varicose veins, haemorrhoids, backache and tiredness, vaginal bleeding; premature birth, miscarriage late in pregnancy.
Stress	Common to all workplaces but especially with conditions like speed up, lean production, shift work, piece work, assembly line, heavy computer screen use; any boring, repetitive, high demand job where production pressures take priority over human needs	Miscarriages, hormonal imbalances.