

RISKS TO NEW AND EXPECTANT MOTHERS AT WORK

Manual Handling Assessment for New or Expectant Mothers

The Risks

- Pregnant workers can be especially at risk from manual handling injury. For example, hormonal changes can affect the ligaments, increasing susceptibility to injury; postural problems may increase as the pregnancy progresses.
- There can also be risks for those who have recently given birth, for example after a Caesarean section there should be a temporary limitation on lifting and handling capabilities.
- There is no evidence to suggest that breast-feeding mothers are at greater risk from manual handling injury than any other workers.

How to control the risks

- It may be possible to alter the nature of risk so that risks from manual handling are reduced for all workers, not only for new or expectant mothers.
- It may be necessary to address specific needs of the worker and reduce the amount of physical work.

Cold or Heat Hazards on New or Expectant Mothers

Extreme conditions in the workplace are unlikely but special attention should be paid to environmental conditions.

The risks

- When pregnant, women tolerate heat less well and may more readily faint or be more liable to heat stress (this risk is likely to be reduced after birth but it is not certain how quickly an improvement comes about).
- Breast-feeding may be impaired by heat dehydration.
- No specific problems arise from working in extreme cold, although for general health and safety reasons, warm clothing should be provided.

How to control the risks

- Pregnant workers should not be exposed to prolonged heat at work; their work schedules should be designed accordingly.

Movement or Posture Hazards for New or Expectant Mothers

The risks

- Fatigue from standing and other physical work has been associated with miscarriage, premature birth and low birth weight.

- Excessive physical or mental pressure may cause stress and can give rise to anxiety and raised blood pressure.
- Pregnant workers may experience problems in working at heights, for example on ladders or platforms.
- Working in tightly fitting workspaces, which do not adjust sufficiently to take account of increased abdominal size, particularly during the later stages of pregnancy, can lead to strain and sprain injuries.
- Dexterity, agility, co-ordination, speed of movement, reach and balance may also be impaired and an increased risk of accidents may need to be considered.

How to control the risks

- Ensure that hours of work and the volume and pacing of work are not excessive and that, where possible, the employees themselves have some control over how their work is organised.
- Ensure that seating is available where appropriate.
- Longer or more frequent rest breaks will help to avoid or reduce fatigue.
- Adjusting workstations or work procedures may help remove postural problems.

Expectant mothers who work with Display Screen Equipment (DSE)

It is now recognised that levels of ionising and non-ionising electromagnetic radiation likely to be generated by display screen equipment are well below those set out in international recommendations for limiting risk to human health created by such emissions and the National Radiological Protection Board does not consider such levels to pose a significant risk to health.

Concerns about the use of DSE are most liable to arise from problems of poor posture resulting from badly designed workstations and/or work with insufficient rest breaks.

The risks

- DSE workstations which are below the required standards can lead to muscular discomfort and/or headaches and for both of these there is a greater risk of them occurring as a pregnancy progresses.
- Work at a DSE with insufficient or inappropriate rest-breaks can lead to symptoms, which include muscular discomfort and headaches (these are expected to become progressively more likely during the development of a pregnancy).

How to control the risks

- In the light of the scientific evidence pregnant women do not need to stop work with DSE. However, to avoid problems caused by stress and anxiety, women who are pregnant or planning children and are worried about working with DSE should contact the Health & Safety Manager for current authoritative scientific information and advice.
- Any DSE workstation used by a pregnant employee must conform to at least the minimum requirements of the legislation. These are addressed under a general assessment for all DSE Users.
- It is important that pregnant employees who work at DSE workstations have regular rest breaks i.e. 5-10 minute break for every 50-60 minutes of work.