

Workplace Reproductive Health

Wendy Burgoyne

Best Start: Ontario's Maternal, Newborn and
Early Child Development Resource Centre

Work and Pregnancy Issues

- Women in their reproductive years make up about half of the workforce
- Most women:
 - work for pay during pregnancy
 - work until baby is born
 - return to work
- Performance improves in pregnancy

Employment of Canadian Women

- Workplace policies, exposure limits, safety equipment, work stations designed for men
- Women work in the following areas:
 - 32% sales and service
 - 25% clerical and administration
 - 8% health related fields
 - 7% management
 - 5% education

Concerns:

- Three most common workplace concerns during pregnancy according to Motherisk:
 1. Computers
 2. Organic solvents
 3. Lead
- Most common risk is standing and heavy work

Workplace Risks

- Work itself does not increase risk
- “Healthy Worker Effect”
- “Macho Maternity”
- Reproductive health is much broader than pregnancy
- Early pregnancy is a critical period

Reproductive Problems

- Decreased libido
- Menstrual problems
- Damaged sperm or ovum
- Infertility or low fertility
- Problems in pregnancy (toxemia, hypertension)
- Birth defects
- Miscarriage
- Small for date or early delivery
- Infant death
- Developmental or health problems

Ergonomic

- Standing or sitting for long periods of time
- Heavy lifting/work
- Repetitive movement

Pregnant Workers: avoid standing & heavy lifting/work, take breaks, change positions as much as possible

American Medical Association

➤ Standing

- Prolonged (>4 hours) -24 weeks

➤ Stooping or bending

- Repetitive (>10 times/hour) -20 weeks

➤ Stair climbing

- Repetitive (>3 times/shift) -20 weeks

➤ Lifting

- Repetitive (>23 kg) -20 weeks
- Repetitive (>11 kg) -24 week

SOGC – Strenuous Work

- Stoop or bend more than 10x per hour
- Climb ladder more than 3x per shift
- Stand for more than 4 hours at one time
- Climb stairs more than 3x per shift
- Work more than 40 hours per week
- Shift work
- Lift more than 23 kg (50 lbs) after 20 weeks
- Lift more than 11 kg (24 lbs) after 24 weeks
- Stoop, bend or climb ladders after 28 weeks
- Stand more than 30 minutes per hour after 32 weeks

Physical

- Noise & Vibrations
- X-rays
- Re-assurance about computer use
- Extreme temperatures

Pregnant Workers: avoid heat, x-rays, and noise over 85 decibels

Noise

Painful

- 140--firearms, air raid siren
- 130--jackhammer
- 120--jet plane takeoff

Extremely Loud

- 110--rock music
- 100--snowmobile, chainsaw
- 90--lawnmower

Loud

- 80--alarm clock
- 70--busy traffic, vacuum cleaner
- 60--dishwasher

Faint

- 30--whisper

Biological

- Biological risks, especially for health care and daycare workers
- Measles, Chicken Pox, Fifth Disease, Cytomegalovirus, TB

Pregnant Workers: hand washing, food preparation and storage, avoid contact with people with infections

Chemical

- Some chemicals of concern include heavy metals, pesticides, solvents, anaesthetic gases
- Material Safety Data Sheets, www.ccohs.ca
 - testing for embryo toxicity is not mandatory
 - can be exempted as confidential business information
- Motherisk, www.motherisk.org

Pregnant Workers: read MSDS sheets, avoid chemicals, protective clothing, ventilation, follow guidelines

Stress at Work

- Time pressure
- Exhaustion
- Fear of lay-off, bump, transfer
- Insensitivity to my needs
- Unclear or conflicting duties
- Lack of control over my work
- Address the causes of stress

Stress Outside Work

- Work and family responsibilities
- Commuting
- Concerns over physical health
- Arguments with family members
- Eldercare & day care
- Caring for ill or disabled family
- Financial concerns

Work Hours

- Shift work
- Night shift
- Rotating shifts
- Long work days or work weeks
- Short notice of schedule changes
- Commuting
- Second shift

Pregnant Workers: extra breaks, rest when you can, limit overtime, ask for day shifts, ask for help at home

“Lifestyle”

- Alcohol
- Tobacco
- Diet
- Activity
- Stress

Pregnant Workers: healthy lifestyle

Dads too. . .

- It takes 3 months for a sperm to develop
- Damaged sperm can fertilise an egg
- No protection for preconception
- Difficulty in requesting consideration
- Women as gatekeepers to men's health
- Support and encouragement can help a pregnant partner make healthier choices

Fathers-to-be: pay special attention to healthy environment and behaviours for at least 3 months prior to conception, support and encourage partner during pregnancy

Discrimination Cases

- US Johnson Controls - lead exposure
 - women had to have proof of sterilisation
 - results in favour on women's rights
 - male complaint not resolved
- Weins vs Inco - Nickel plant
 - women not allowed to work
 - deemed human rights discrimination
- Employment vs reproduction

Federal Policies

➤ Canada

- Women cannot be dismissed from work because of pregnancy
- Canada Labour Code: Protective reassignment and leave for pregnancy & nursing, rarely used
- EI and Sick Leave during pregnancy

Extended Leave

- 15 weeks maternity benefits, 35 weeks parenting benefits
- Time off work increased from 6 to 10 months
- Shorter leaves associated with father taking parenting leave, non-permanent job, low benefits
- Mothers not receiving benefits - 4 month leaves
- Proportion of new mothers receiving benefits increased from 54% to 61% - lower threshold
- 1 out of 10 fathers took parenting leave
- 80% of mothers planned to return to work

Provincial Policies

- Quebec - Safe Maternity Experience
 - preventative reassignment & paid leave for pregnancy & nursing
 - 20,000 women a year use policy
- Ontario Health and Safety Act
 - right to refuse work
 - general protective reassignment & leave
- WHIMIS - right to know

Ontario Human Rights Commission

➤ Pregnancy - Before, During and After: Know Your Rights

- protects against discrimination, harassment because of pregnancy
- requires employers to provide accommodation for special needs

➤ www.ohrc.on.ca

Examples of Discrimination

- Limiting opportunities and training
- Not assigning a pregnant woman to a major project
- Being overly critical of her work
- Docking time for using the washroom more often
- Inappropriate comments or jokes
- Termination due to pregnancy
- Unwanted transfers
- Denying sick benefits

Duty to Accommodate

- The special needs of pregnant women must be accommodated, short of “undue hardship”
- Temporary re-location or alternate duties
 - Flexible schedule to accommodate appointments
 - Breaks as necessary
 - Supportive environment

Benefits

- If something is harmful to pregnant women, it is likely harmful to other employees
- 50% of sick leave in pregnancy due to workplace factors such as standing
- Family friendly studies show benefits
- No studies on pregnancy friendly workplaces
- Maternity leaves – decreased low birth weight

The Basics

- Employees have a right to a safe work environment
- Employees have a right to know about risks
- Reproductive health is important
- There are reproductive risks at work
- Exposure limits do not assure protection
- Reproductive policies must avoid discrimination

Effective Strategies

➤ Education

- Posters, brochures etc.
- Quit smoking programs at work

➤ Practices

- Supportive managers

➤ Policy

- Light Duty Policy

Education

- Raise awareness of health risks at work
- Prenatal information
- Quit smoking supports
- Information about leave options

Practices

- Flexible schedules
- Supportive supervisors
- Support for family friendly approaches
- Positive attitude to each pregnant employee
- Protection from exposures to hazards

Policies

- Many policies impact reproductive health:
 - Light duty policy
 - Emergency transportation & first aid plan
 - Smoke free workplace
 - Flex time, part time, job sharing options
 - Additional maternity leave
 - Paid paternity leave
 - Employee assistance program

Individual Risk Assessment

- Type of exposure
- Duration of exposure
- Intensity of exposure
- Protection
- Other exposures
- Medical history

Possible Activities

- Workplace survey
- Workplace awards
- Distribute brochures
- Put up posters
- Display or Health Fair
- Prenatal Programs
- Mail-based self care
- Presentation to business groups
- Workplace newsletter
- Mass media
- Contests
- Presentations to management
- Lunch and Learn
- Policy change
- List local resources

Best Start Resources

- Camera ready ads
- Newsletter
- Posters
- Display
- Work and Pregnancy Do Mix Brochure
- Pregnancy Friendly Guide
- Workplace Reproductive Health manual

Other Useful Resources

- Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, Ergonomics booklet
- Health Canada
- Policy: The key to a healthy workplace, Ottawa Carleton Health Unit
- March of Dimes resources for fathers

Sources of Information

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, www.ccohs.ca
- Motherisk, www.motherisk.org
- Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, www.ohcow.on.ca
- Ontario Human Rights Commission, www.ohrc.on.ca

How we can help

➤ Best Start offers:

- Resources
- Consultation & presentations
- ebulletin & website, www.beststart.org

- Best Start Resource Centre
- Tel: 1-800-397-9567 x2279, 1-705-856-2997
- wendyb@beststart.org