

# How to be a Pregnancy Friendly Workplace

Policies  
and Practices  
that Make a  
Difference



*best start*  
*meilleur départ*

Ontario's maternal, newborn and early  
child development resource centre

Centre de ressources sur la maternité,  
les nouveau-nés et le développement  
des jeunes enfants de l'Ontario

# Healthy Pregnancies at Work

## Why Be Pregnancy Friendly?

A healthy workplace makes good business sense. Research has shown that performance ratings improve during pregnancy, and most workers return to work after their maternity/parenting leave. Promoting health can be simple and inexpensive. Perhaps you already have some pregnancy friendly policies or practices.

Information and a supportive environment can help a pregnant woman have a healthy pregnancy and healthy baby, while continuing to be a productive worker.

## You May Have a Pregnant Worker Now...

Do you have prospective parents at your workplace? Women in their reproductive years now make up almost half of all workers. Eight out of ten will become pregnant during their working life.

## What Are the Benefits?

Employees may:

- do a better job
- work harder
- be absent and late less often
- be more likely to stay with the company
- care more about work
- be healthier
- have healthier pregnancies, babies and families

## Special Requirements During Pregnancy May Include:

- Temporary relocation to another workstation
- Temporary alternative duties
- Flexible schedule to accommodate for medical appointments
- More frequent breaks

# Rights of Pregnant Workers

The Ontario Human Rights Commission ([www.ohrc.on.ca](http://www.ohrc.on.ca)) clearly identifies the rights of pregnant women. It is illegal to discriminate against workers because of pregnancy. The employer is required to accommodate the special needs of pregnant workers.

## Examples of Discrimination Against a Pregnant Woman:

- Asking a potential employee if they are pregnant
- Limiting or withholding opportunities or training
- Not assigning her to a major project or team
- Being overly critical of her work
- Docking time for using the washroom more often
- Making inappropriate remarks or jokes related to her pregnancy
- Termination because of pregnancy
- Subjecting her to unwanted transfers
- Denying sick leave benefits



## Before Pregnancy:

Don't wait until you have a pregnant worker to put in place healthy policies or practices. Information and a healthy work environment will help all workers, particularly men and women planning a family.

## Preventing Problems During Pregnancy:

In general, it is safe for most pregnant women to continue working during pregnancy. Work itself does not increase the risk of having an unhealthy baby. However, there are some specific risks that can be reduced by planning ahead.

Standing and heavy lifting can cause a baby to be born too soon or too small. Stress, long work hours or long work weeks can also be harmful. Some chemicals are reproductive hazards, particularly during the first few months of pregnancy.

Modified duties, flexible hours and information about possible risks in the workplace are important ways for you to support employees.

## Reproductive Health Risks in the Workplace:

- Heavy lifting
- Standing for long periods of time
- Working more than 40 hours per week
- Tobacco smoke
- Heavy metals and some chemicals
- Oil based paints
- Radiation and anesthetic gas
- Some infectious diseases
- Excessive heat and noise
- Stress and fatigue



## The Boss:

**You play a major role in employee health. This is particularly true with pregnant workers.**

**As a caring employer or supervisor you can:**

- Talk with pregnant workers about health concerns at work
- Help women make the small changes that may be necessary to work safely



## Men Too:

It takes three months for a sperm to develop. During this time workplace hazards such as radiation, smoke, heat or chemicals can cause low sperm counts, damaged sperm or infertility. If a damaged sperm does fertilize an egg, it can result in a miscarriage or possible health problems in the baby. A healthy workplace can help men and women have the healthiest families possible.

## The Message is:

Health initiatives send a message to employees that their health is important. They state a company commitment to the well being of pregnant women. A simple change such as preferred parking for pregnant employees says that your company cares about employees and families. While pregnant women benefit from exercise, they also benefit from choice. If the day is icy, women are tired, or have extra things to carry, they will appreciate the parking privilege extended to pregnant women.

## What Would Help Most?

Determining employee needs is very important. This can be done in a variety of ways including surveys, individual interviews, suggestion boxes or focus groups. Whatever the method used, employees will get the feeling that the company cares about them. Once you have identified employee needs you can set about developing a plan or program that is affordable, workable, and meets the needs of workers.



## Baby Steps to a Pregnancy Friendly Workplace:

- Involve workers in planning for a healthier workplace
- Find out about needs and concerns of employees
- Determine potential risks in the workplace
- Look at what other companies do
- Establish priorities
  - Develop a plan
  - Consider how to phase in changes
  - Decide who will be responsible
  - Raise awareness about the new policy or program
- Implement the changes
- Follow-up to make sure initiatives meet needs
- Decide on further actions

## Examples of Pregnancy Friendly Education:

- Talk to pregnant workers about ways to reduce risks
- Have quit smoking resources on hand
- Talk to workers about options for maternity/parenting leave
- Put up displays and posters about healthy choices
- Hand out a package of information about healthy pregnancies
- Bring in community agencies for presentations
- Put together a binder of community services
- Provide peer support training for co-workers
- Train supervisors to be supportive and sensitive

# Education that Makes a Difference

Education programs are often the easiest change a workplace can make. Education can take many forms including posters, brochures, fairs, lunch and learns, displays, information packages, newsletters, or workshops. Combinations of these approaches will have a stronger impact than a single approach.

During pregnancy, workers are highly motivated to look at their health. Timely information may be enough for women to make significant health changes. Proactive workplaces have packages of information ready for pregnant workers. Encourage women to check Material Safety Data Sheets and to call Motherisk (see page 10) about specific concerns. Due to literacy and language barriers, you may need to help some workers to understand the information in written pregnancy materials.



# Policies that Make a Difference

Policies set the tone of the workplace. They are a means of keeping in place important programs that reflect workplace values. Many general policies impact on the health of pregnant women. Perhaps you already have some in place. Every additional change you make has the potential to help pregnant women.

Involve workers in policy making whenever possible. Those most directly affected by the policy must buy into it for it to be effective.

## Examples of Pregnancy Friendly Policies:

- Transportation Plan for emergency medical care
- Emergency First Aid Plan
- Smoke-free Workplace
- Light Duty Policy
- Flex-time and Part-time Options
- Job Sharing Options
- Employee and Family Assistance Program





## Examples of Pregnancy Friendly Practices:

- Protect your workers from reproductive hazards
- Encourage pregnant women to check Material Safety Data Sheets
- Provide appropriate protective equipment
- Ensure good ventilation, safe temperatures and noise levels
- Be flexible to accommodate medical appointments
- Schedule short breaks at least every 2 hours
- Provide a place where women can rest on their breaks
- Have a positive attitude towards pregnant employees
- Help workers make small changes to reduce risks

# Practices that Make a Difference

Policies and education programs are not enough on their own. Good policies need to come into practice to be helpful to workers. A supportive workplace environment has a great impact on producing lasting changes in employee health.

### Supportive workplaces:

- Provide positive feedback and encouragement
- Engage in two way communication
- Show respect, mentor & empower employees
- Recognize employees have a life outside of work
- Offer support and flexibility to balance conflicting demands

### Employees in supportive workplaces are:

- Less likely to be stressed
- More satisfied and committed to their jobs
- More likely to agree with company policies
- More likely to trust management
- Absent fewer days and work more hours in a week
- More likely to take work home

# Medical Help

In most cases pregnant women can continue to work with few accommodations. Occasionally a pregnant worker will need urgent medical care. Be prepared.

Help pregnant women get to the hospital right away if they have any of the following symptoms or if they say something does not feel right:

- Bad cramps or stomach pains that don't go away
- Bleeding, trickle or gush of fluid from the vagina
- Increase in the amount of vaginal discharge
- Lower back pain or pressure, or a change in lower backache
- A feeling the baby is pushing down
- Fever, chills, dizziness, vomiting or a bad headache
- Blurry vision or spots before the eyes
- Sudden or severe swelling of the feet, hands or face
- Contractions, or change in the strength/number of contractions
- A significant change in the baby's movements



It is important for pregnant women with any of these symptoms to get to the hospital or see a doctor. Do not delay.

## **Additional information:**

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, [www.ccohs.ca](http://www.ccohs.ca)
- The Workers Health and Safety Centre, [www.whsc.on.ca](http://www.whsc.on.ca)
- Ontario Human Rights Commission, [www.ohrc.on.ca](http://www.ohrc.on.ca)
- Health Canada, [www.healthcanada.ca](http://www.healthcanada.ca)
- Maternity and Parental Leave Benefits, [www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca)

# **Resources About Work and Pregnancy**

## **Best Start Resources**

Best Start has produced several resources about work and pregnancy. Many are available in both French and English. To view or order Best Start resources, visit [www.beststart.org](http://www.beststart.org). Best Start work and pregnancy resources include:

- Posters
- Brochure for pregnant employees
- Camera ready ads
- Newsletter
- Workplace Reproductive Health manual

## **Specific Concerns:**

- Motherisk, 1-416-813-6780 or [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org)
- Material Safety Data Sheets, [www.msdsonline.com](http://www.msdsonline.com)

**Best Start: Ontario's Maternal, Newborn  
and Early Child Development Resource Centre**  
c / o OPC  
Suite 1900  
180 Dundas Street West  
Toronto, ON M5G 1Z8  
Phone: 416-408-2249 or 1-800-397-9567  
Fax: 416-408-2122  
Email: [beststart@beststart.org](mailto:beststart@beststart.org)  
Website: [www.beststart.org](http://www.beststart.org)

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