Reproductive Hazards of the Workplace

This information sheet talks about harmful exposures that may be present in some work settings and offers guidance on how to reduce some of these exposures. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What types of hazards could be in a workplace?
This fact sheet highlights chemicals and metals; however, there are many types of workplace hazards. In addition to chemicals, anesthetic gases and heavy metals, workplace hazards may include: ionizing radiation, loud noise, heat or cold stress, strenuous physical exertion, repetitive movements, whole body vibration, infectious agents, injury, emotional stress and changing shift rotations.

Sometimes, workers carry hazardous substances (dust, powder, chemicals, metal) home on their shoes or clothing. Because of this, it is also important talk to your partner or other adults living in your home about their workplace hazards.

In general, exposures can happen through: inhaling substances (breathing in a gas, powder, or vapor into your lungs), absorption through skin, or ingestion (eating or drinking).

How can workplace exposures affect my health?
For many possible workplace exposures, studies have not been performed to determine how they might affect a person’s fertility or pregnancy. However, workplace exposures may affect other areas of health, such as asthma, allergic reactions or cancer. For this reason, it is appropriate for all workers to safeguard their health in the workplace, even if they are not pregnant. Men should also follow proper safety procedures to protect their health.

How can I learn more about chemicals in my workplace?
The best way to find out what chemicals are in the product(s) you use, or products that are used around you, is to get a copy of the Material Safety Data Sheets for that product, called MSDS for short. MSDS should be available for all chemicals used at a worksite. The workplace is required to make sure the MSDS are readily available to workers. The MSDS can help you to learn about chemicals used at your workplace and how to properly handle and store them. However, most MSDS do not provide helpful information about reproductive risks, because the sheets do not put risks in the context of the amount of exposure.

It is helpful to remember that even though a potentially harmful substance or condition may be present at your worksite, it does not mean that you are at risk for exposure. In addition, smelling an odor does not mean you have had a significant exposure.

By following proper safety and handling procedures, exposures will likely be kept below levels that would affect your health or pregnancy.

How can I reduce my exposure to potential hazards in my workplace?
Consider talking with an occupational health specialist or industrial hygienist who may be able to provide information that is specific to your workplace.

Employers are responsible for making sure the workplace is safe for all workers. If there are concerns about safety at work, you may consider discussing the following with your workplace:

- Substitution: Is there a safer chemical that can be substituted for the one of concern?
- Local Exhaust: Can a local exhaust be used to reduce exposure? (e.g. fume hoods)

In addition, some good basic protective measures for any worker are outlined below:

- If eating at the workplace:
  - Don’t eat or drink at a work station. Eat only in designated eating areas.
  - Wash your hands well before you eat or drink.
  - Store your food and drinks in a refrigerator that is only for food.

- If you smoke and are unable to quit, cut back and do not smoke at work. If you do smoke, wash your hands before and after having a cigarette to prevent breathing in or swallowing chemicals that you might have on your hands.

- If you are exposed to dust or powders at work, consider having another set of clothes and shoes that can stay at work. This way, you can wear clean clothes and shoes home. Ask if your employer can provide work clothing that can be laundered at the worksite, so that you don’t have to bring contaminated work clothes home. If you must bring your work clothes home to be washed, keep them separate from your family’s laundry.
• If your job requires you to sit or stand for long periods of time, take regular short breaks of about 5-10 minutes every 2 hours. Change your position by sitting or taking a walk.

• Make sure that harmful waste or trash is disposed of properly in containers with lids.

• If there is a spill or leak, follow the proper safety procedures, as outlined by your employer and the MSDS, to clean the area.

What kind of safety protection can be used?
All work places should provide the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for handling and working around hazardous situations. Some examples of protective equipment include gloves, shoes, aprons, gowns, hoods, or masks.

• Use what is available and required for your job. Use protective equipment at all times, not just when pregnant.

• Keep your training on how to properly use the protective equipment up to date.

• Make sure hoods, respirators, and other equipment are working properly.

• If you wear protective equipment (such as a respirator), be sure it fits correctly. As a woman’s body changes during pregnancy, protective equipment may need to be re-fitted.

• If you wear a respirator, remember that respirators are not a substitute for appropriate permanent exhaust ventilation (such as fume hoods, exhaust ducts and/or exhaust fans). Respirators are designed to be used only for a short period of time.

• If the right protective equipment is not currently at your worksite, ask your employer about getting it.

What if I am feeling sick while at work?
If you are having health problems, or health problems become worse while at your work place, tell your health care provider.

You and your employer can consult with an industrial hygienist or occupational medicine specialist outside your place of employment; try looking for them at a local medical university. Industrial hygienists should be able to provide an independent assessment on ways to improve the safety of your job, if needed, and may be able to give advice on how to work with employers in implementing these changes. If you need to find a MSDS, most are available through the internet.

If you are a member of a union or professional organization, you may consider talking with them or directly to your employer. Within these groups, there may already be negotiated rules for pregnant women that may be different than those set by the government. These negotiated rules for pregnant women may not be based on any known risks, but they may be stricter because of the process of previous negotiations.

Below is a list of other resources that may be helpful:
• National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/99-104/

• Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA): http://www.osha.gov or 800-321-OSHA.