

High noise levels

High noise levels (over 90 dB) may be linked to low birth weight, especially when combined with other things like hours of standing. If you are working with high noise levels, talk to your prenatal care provider and/or occupational health and safety representative.

Stress

High levels of stress may contribute to low birth weight and preterm birth. For your own health, as well as the health of your baby, take steps to limit stress at work and at home. Try these suggestions:

- Make a list of your biggest stressors. Divide them into two sections—ones you can do something about, and ones you can't.
- Make a plan for the ones you can do something about. Are there small changes you could make? Who could help you? Can you talk to your supervisor about these issues?
- Make a plan for coping with the ones you can't change. If you can't change the situation, can you change your attitude or approach to it?
- Build stress reducers into your day. These may include exercise, meditation, stretching, humour, art, fresh air, massage, conversation.
- Get help if you need it.

If you are worried about your stress levels, talk to your prenatal care provider and/or contact your Employee Assistance Plan (if available).

Pregnancy discrimination

Pregnancy discrimination means being treated differently because you are pregnant. The law protects you from this. You cannot be fired, demoted, put on forced leave, or excluded from professional opportunities (like projects, contracts, trips, conferences) just because you are pregnant. You also have the right to return to your former position or an equivalent after maternity leave.

If you have concerns about pregnancy discrimination and have not been able to solve them by speaking to your manager, supervisor, or human resources representative, contact the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission in Calgary at 297-6571 and speak to an intake officer about your complaint.

Taking steps to protect yourself and your baby

Finding out about workplace risks is the first step in making your job safer for you and your baby. We hope you will use the information in this pamphlet to think about your workplace and make any necessary changes. Even small changes can make a difference.

Here are some more tips and reminders for a healthy pregnancy and workplace:

- Let your employer know you're pregnant early in your pregnancy.
- Find out about chemicals and other potential hazards at work.
- Talk to your employer about changing your work routine if necessary (e.g., increased breaks, lighter duty, temporary transfer).
- Take a short break every two hours.
- Keep healthy snacks handy.
- Stay away from tobacco smoke.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- Limit your overtime.
- Wash your hands often and well.
- Talk to your doctor about your workplace environment.
- Get help if you need it.

Who can I contact for help?

If you have concerns about your workplace environment, there are several ways to get help. The first step is to talk to your supervisor. Try to:

- Explain your concern.
- Back up your concerns by showing your supervisor the information in this pamphlet or a note from your doctor.
- Offer some suggestions for possible solutions and ask for other ideas.
- Be flexible and willing to negotiate.

Here are some other people who may be able to help:

- Your doctor
- Your human resources department
- An occupational health nurse
- Your community health clinic
- Alberta Workplace Health and Safety (Toll-free at 1-866-415-8690, or online at <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/hre/whs/>)
- The Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission (297-6571)

Pregnant and Working?

Keep your
workplace safe
for you and
your baby.



calgary health region

Reducing Workplace Risks

Working during a healthy pregnancy is usually safe. However, some jobs can pose certain risks and demands. This pamphlet offers tips for identifying and reducing workplace risks.

Chemicals and hazardous substances

Some chemicals and substances can increase your risk of miscarriage or having a child with a birth defect. If you work around chemicals or hazardous substances, try to:

- Find out about the chemicals or substances you are exposed to. You can do this by checking the WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) data sheets at your workplace or by talking to your occupational health and safety representative.
- Avoid any chemicals that you do not need to be exposed to.
- Use protective clothing.
- Work in a well ventilated area.
- Follow recommended guidelines.

In some cases, you may need to be temporarily assigned to another position while you are pregnant. If you have concerns, or if you have symptoms that you think are not related to pregnancy, talk to your prenatal care provider (doctor, midwife or nurse) or call the Department of Medical Genetics at 943-7373 (physician referral preferred).

Infectious diseases

If you work in a health care setting or work with children, you are more likely to be exposed to childhood illnesses and other infectious diseases. Some infectious diseases can pose a risk to your baby. Fortunately, most mothers are already immune to many of these (e.g., chicken pox, fifth disease and measles).

To lower your risk, be sure to:

- Wash your hands carefully and often.
- Make sure food is fully cooked and well refrigerated.
- See your doctor if you think you have come into contact with someone who has an infectious disease such as, chicken pox, measles (rubella), fifth disease (parvovirus, also known as “slap cheek”) and tuberculosis. (Tuberculosis is very rare in this country, but if you work with new immigrants, you may be at higher risk for exposure.)

Radiation

Most pregnant women who work in areas where radiation is used are safe because safety standards today are very high. In addition to following all guidelines, be sure to:

- Avoid contact with patients who are being treated with radioactive isotopes.
- Avoid holding patients during x-rays.

Some women are concerned about radiation from computer screens. There is no evidence to suggest this will harm your baby.

Standing

Standing for over four hours without a break can affect the blood flow to your baby. If your job requires you to stand for long periods of time, try to:

- Use a stool.
- Take breaks. (You should take a short break every two hours.)
- Ask your employer to give you other tasks so that you have opportunities to sit or walk.
- Wear comfortable shoes.

Sitting

Sitting for over four hours can reduce blood flow and increase fluid in your legs and feet. If your job involves a lot of sitting, try to:

- Take short breaks to stretch or walk whenever possible.
- Keep a footstool at your desk to change the position of your feet from time to time.
- Put a cushion behind your lower back for extra support.
- Change positions as often as possible.

Repetitive hand movement

Repetitive hand movement (like spending hours working a cash register or computer) can lead to repetitive strain illnesses (RSIs) and carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS). Pregnant women may be at higher risk to develop RSI and CTS.

To lower your risk, try to:

- Change positions as often as possible.
- Change repetitive tasks as often as possible.
- Position your elbows at a 90 degree angle when working at a computer, and keep your wrists straight. (You may need to request an adjustable keyboard tray.)
- See a doctor if you have tingling, pain, numbness or cramping in your arms, wrists or hands.

Lifting and physically demanding work

Women who work in physically demanding jobs need to take special care to protect themselves and their baby. If your work is physically demanding, try to:

- Minimize heavy lifting. If possible, do not lift more than 23 kg (50 pounds).
- Keep repetitive lifting to less than 11 kg (25 pounds) after 24 weeks of pregnancy. If you do a lot of lifting at work, talk to your doctor or midwife about lifting techniques and maximum loads.
- Minimize repetitive stooping and bending. If you do a lot of stooping or bending at work, talk to your doctor or midwife about safe limits.
- Minimize repetitive climbing. This includes ladders, poles or stairs. If you do a lot of climbing at work, talk to your doctor or midwife about safe limits.

If you are concerned that your work is physically stressful and may cause problems in your pregnancy, talk to your employer and your prenatal care provider (doctor, midwife or nurse).

Shift work and long work hours

Some studies suggest that women who work changing shifts and long hours may be at a higher risk for preterm labour, low birth weight or miscarriage. The risk is greater if shift work and long hours are combined with other risk factors like hours of standing or high levels of noise.

If you are working long hours, try to:

- Ask for extra breaks.
- Take time to stretch if you've been sitting.
- Take time to rest if you've been standing.
- Limit overtime as much as possible.

If you have to work shifts, ask that they be rotated forward (e.g., moving from morning shifts to afternoons to nights).

This is less tiring than rotating backward (e.g., moving from nights to afternoons to mornings). Talk to your supervisor about the possibility of working straight day shifts. Take a short break every two hours.

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk to your doctor, midwife or nurse practitioner.

