Pregnant Workers & Return-to-Work: Unique Hazards and Protections Meeting Kit

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Pregnancy changes a worker's relationship with nearly every physical and chemical hazard on the job. What was manageable before may carry additional risk now, not because the worker is less capable, but because there is a second person to protect. The same applies after a leave, whether for parental reasons, surgery, or a health absence. The body takes time to rebuild conditioning, and returning too fast to a full physical workload creates a window of real injury risk.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

As pregnancy progresses, the centre of gravity shifts and ligaments loosen, making joints less stable and activities like lifting, bending, and prolonged standing more hazardous than before. Some chemical and biological exposures carry elevated risk during pregnancy even within normal occupational limits, so additional controls may be needed beyond standard procedures.

The body works harder during pregnancy, meaning heat and physical exertion build up faster – tasks that felt manageable before may become too much sooner, and the risk of heat illness is higher. After extended leave, muscles, joints, and cardiovascular capacity decline, so returning to full physical duty too quickly raises the risk of musculoskeletal injury. A graduated return plan is part of working safely, not optional.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Know That Accommodation Is a Legal Right

In most jurisdictions, pregnant workers are entitled by law to reasonable accommodation. This can include modified duties, adjusted hours, more frequent rest breaks, or temporary reassignment away from specific hazards. This is not asking for special treatment. It is using a protection that exists specifically for this situation. Knowing your rights is the first step to using them.

Disclose Early When You Can

Early disclosure gives your employer time to make adjustments before the job becomes a hazard rather than after. You are not required to disclose the moment you find out, and timing is personal. But the sooner accommodations are in place, the better protected you are throughout the pregnancy.

Identify the Specific Hazards That Apply to Your Job

Work with your occupational health team, your supervisor, or your healthcare provider to pinpoint what needs to change for your specific tasks. Often, targeted changes are enough:

- Swapping a lifting task for one that doesn’t require the same range of motion
- Adjusting which chemicals, you work with or increasing ventilation controls
- Modifying your work position or adding a stool for tasks that normally require extended standing

Return Gradually After Leave

If you’re coming back after parental leave or a health absence, ask about a graduated return. Starting back at lighter duties or reduced hours for the first few weeks gives your body time to rebuild without overloading it. Returning at full intensity after weeks away is how return-to-work injuries happen.

Support Your Teammates Through These Transitions

If a coworker is on modified duties, stepping in to cover the difference without complaint is part of being a good crew member. Accommodations are not a sign someone isn’t pulling their weight. They’re a sign the team is doing right by its people. A workplace that handles these transitions well is one where everybody feels safer bringing their real situation to the table.

Reassess as Your Pregnancy Progresses

An accommodation that worked at three months may not be enough at seven months. The body keeps changing throughout pregnancy, and so do the risks. Check in with your supervisor or occupational health team at regular intervals, not just at the start. If a task that was manageable earlier in the pregnancy is starting to feel like too much, that’s important information.

Know the Warning Signs That Mean Stop and Seek Help

Certain physical symptoms during work require you to stop what you’re doing. Tell your supervisor, sit down, and seek medical attention. These are not complaints. They are signals the body uses to communicate that something needs attention.

FINAL WORD

These transitions are temporary. The culture you build around them is not. A team that steps up, stays flexible, and uses the protections that exist without making workers fight for them is a team that takes care of its people.