Pregnant Workers & Return-to-Work: Unique Hazards and Protections Stats and Facts

FACTS

- **Pregnancy Changes Physical Capacity:** Shifts in center of gravity, reduced balance, and fatigue alter a worker's ability to safely perform routine tasks. Hazard assessments must be updated to reflect these changes.
- **Chemical Exposure Affects More Than One Person:** Solvents, pesticides, heavy metals, and cleaning agents can cross the placental barrier. A pregnant worker's exposure limit is effectively a shared limit.
- **Physical Demands Carry Real Risk:** Prolonged standing, heavy lifting, and repetitive work during pregnancy are linked to preterm labor, low birth weight, and musculoskeletal injury.
- **Return-to-Work Is Not a Full Reset:** Workers returning from maternity leave may still be recovering and may not safely perform all pre-leave duties without accommodation.
- **Fatigue Is a Workplace Hazard:** Pregnancy and postpartum fatigue impair concentration, reaction time, and decision-making — the same functions that protect workers from injury.
- **Silence Is Common:** Fear of job loss or stigma may prevent workers from disclosing pregnancy limitations — continuing to work in conditions that put themselves and an unborn child at risk.
- **Accommodation Is a Legal Requirement:** Under the U.S. PWFA and Canadian legislation, employers must provide reasonable accommodations for limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth, and related medical conditions.

STATS

- The U.S. Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA), effective June 27, 2023, requires all employers with 15 or more employees to accommodate known limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions, enforced by the EEOC.
- The EEOC received approximately 100,000 public comments during the PWFA rulemaking period — reflecting the scale of unmet need for pregnancy protections across U.S. workplaces.
- In 2024, the EEOC began charging employers with PWFA violations, including cases where pregnant workers were denied seating, breaks, or modified duties recommended by their physicians.
- Chemical exposures, prolonged standing, heavy lifting, and shift work have been linked to preterm labor, spontaneous abortion, and stillbirth, according to research cited by NIOSH.
- NIOSH identifies biological, chemical, ergonomic, physical, and psychosocial hazards as workplace exposure categories that can adversely affect reproductive health and fetal development.
- In Canada, 69.2 percent of provincial OHS acts require employers to inform workers of pregnancy-related workplace risks, though enforcement varies significantly across jurisdictions, according to a 2026 policy analysis in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.
- Canadian federal law requires employers to transfer a pregnant worker to a safer role if current working conditions pose a physical danger to the employee or unborn child, according to the Canada Labour Code.