

- 5 If the pregnant employee is worried, it is prudent to reduce the following where possible, particularly in late pregnancy:
- lifting heavy loads
 - heavy physical work
 - prolonged standing – for longer than three hours at a time
 - working hours – working longer than around 40 hours per week.
- 6 If a pregnant worker who has been informed of the risk wishes to continue then there are insufficient grounds to impose restrictions against her will.

If you have access to an occupational health or safety professional, they will be able to give you further advice.

References

- 1 NHS Plus, Royal College of Physicians, Faculty of Occupational Medicine. *Physical and shift work in pregnancy: occupational aspects of management. A national guideline*. London: RCP, 2009. www.nhsplus.nhs.uk
- 2 The Health and Safety Executive. *A guide for new and expectant mothers who work*. London: HSE, 2003. www.hse.gov.uk
- 3 The Health and Safety Executive. *Five steps to risk assessment*. London: HSE, 2003. www.hse.gov.uk
- 4 Office of Public Sector Information. *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999*. OPSI, 1999. www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1999/19993242.htm

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Physical and shift work in pregnancy

Occupational aspects of management

Evidence-based guidance for employers



Royal College of Physicians
Setting higher medical standards



This leaflet is intended for employers. It summarises the findings of a review of the research evidence on the risks to pregnant women at work who are exposed to certain hazards. The aspects of work considered are manual handling, prolonged standing, long working hours, shift work and night shifts.¹ The evidence considered applies to women who are well during their pregnancy; those with pregnancy-related complications need to be considered on an individual basis.

Women at work

Pregnancy is not an illness and the majority of women remain well throughout their pregnancy. In fact, research shows that most women who work are healthier during their pregnancy than those who do not work. Some studies also show that women who are employed have a lower risk of early delivery than those who are not. However, while at work a pregnant woman may be exposed to certain hazards that can cause harm to herself or her baby.

Workplace hazards

Some workplace exposures have well known risks in pregnancy, and there are already regulations regarding acceptable levels of exposure (for example the Control of Lead at Work Regulations 2002). Other hazards need to be assessed on an individual basis. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provide guidance on these hazards: *A guide for new and expectant mothers who work.*²

Risk assessment

As the employer, you are responsible for conducting a risk assessment of the potential hazards to pregnant women in the workplace. You are also responsible for implementing any reasonable adjustments and adaptations to reduce their risk.³

Your risk assessment should be undertaken by a 'competent person' as defined under the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.*⁴

To reduce the risk from physical hazards that may cause harm to a pregnant woman or the fetus, you should:

- encourage women of childbearing age to inform you that they are pregnant when they are at an early stage of their pregnancy
- perform a risk assessment of a woman's work soon after she informs you that she is pregnant.

When performing a risk assessment you should assess the amount of physical effort required by the job as well as the duration of the task being performed. An individual risk assessment should be done for each pregnant woman and take into account both environmental and individual factors.

Key points and recommendations of the review

- 1 Inform pregnant employees that our knowledge about the risks from physical factors at work, including heavy physical activity, lifting, prolonged standing, long working hours and night work, is incomplete. We cannot be certain about the size of the risk, or indeed if there is a risk at all. It is possible that there may be a risk from some of these activities, especially if carried out late in pregnancy. However it appears that if there are any risks to mother or baby they are quite small. Indeed, it is possible that being physically active during pregnancy is actually good for the health of mother and baby.
- 2 Discuss the employee's views and concerns about tasks at work. It is important to identify any sources of heavy exposure to lifting, strenuous work, prolonged standing and working for very long hours.
- 3 It is not possible to provide a specific limit for lifting and heavy work, but three hours is a reasonable limit for continuous standing and 40 hours per week for total working time.
- 4 Record any concerns that your employee has, reassure her where possible, and get access to specialist medical advice if you are not sure about a particular aspect of work.