

Women's health and safety

Women are half the workforce, and face many risks at work. But health and safety often concentrates on the risks men face. Standards are often male based. Historically more men were at work. But work has changed, and women's health and safety needs be addressed just as much as men's.

Safety reps need to make sure women's health and safety isn't overlooked. More women safety reps are needed.

What women want

A TUC survey of women safety reps identified the key risks for women as:

- manual handling;
- repetitive injuries or upper limb disorders;
- stress; and
- violence.

Other findings of the survey were:

- most of the women safety reps had never been asked about women's health and safety before;
- women's reports of ill-health or injuries caused by work are often ignored by doctors and employers;
- only one in five employers covered women's health and safety in their safety policy.

Women's health problems

The HSE's 1995 Self-reported Work-related Illness (SWI) survey revealed that:

- at least 100,000 women a year suffer with their backs because of work;
- more than a quarter of women have to lift or move heavy loads at work. Musculo-skeletal disorders associated with heavy lifting, awkward postures, repetitive tasks, are by far the most commonly reported work-related illness;
- stress is the second most commonly reported condition among working women but the source of the most concern;
- one in five women said they were exposed to breathing fumes, dust or other harmful substances at work;
- twice as many females as males reported suffering from work-related headache and eyestrain - an estimated 50,000 workers. Nearly three-quarters of these workers attributed the cause to the use of VDUS.

The gender agenda

There are three main reasons to look separately at women's health and safety:

1. Women are concentrated in certain jobs and therefore face hazards particular to those jobs;
2. Women are physically different from men, in particular with regard to their reproductive capacity; and
3. Women often work a double shift of paid work and then work in the home so there is a duplication of health and safety risks.

Workplace safety policies

Every workplace with five or more workers must have a written policy (it's a good idea even in smaller workplaces) setting out the general approach to health and safety. It should:

- include a general statement of intent to treat men and women equally well;
- detail what the employer will do to listen to women's concerns where they differ from men's;
- identify any hazards to which women and men are exposed separately; and
- indicate what will be done about risks which are specific to women.

Risk assessments

The risk assessments which employers have a legal duty to carry out under the MHSW Regs should address women's needs (they must in any case deal with risks to pregnant and breastfeeding women' - see below).

Action plans

Once a risk assessment has been carried out, your employer must decide how the risks can be eliminated, minimised or controlled. The steps that need to be taken form an "action plan", and safety reps should make sure that:

- the action plan deals with the risks women face at your workplace;
- the action plan sets out what will be done to make women safer and healthier; and
- the action plan has been communicated to women workers so that they know the risks they face and the steps which will be taken to deal with them.

Action points

- Conduct a survey to find out what the women at your workplace think the main health and safety issues are, and what they want to see done
- Draw to management's attention the different problems suffered by women that should be accommodated
- Encourage more women to become safety reps
- Use the GPMU Equality Guide
- Review the workplace safety policy to ensure women's concerns are covered;
- Check whether risk assessments cover the risks to women workers; and
- Decide whether your workplace needs a special action plan for women's health and safety.

Pregnancy

Pregnant women are more susceptible to certain health and safety hazards and MHSW Regs require this to be taken into account. They cover women who are pregnant or who have recently given birth or miscarried in the previous six months or who are breast-feeding.

Employers must:

- Assess the risks in the workplace to the health and safety of new and expectant mothers;
- Ensure they are not exposed to the risks identified by the Risk Assessment which would present a danger to their health or safety; and
- If a risk remains after taking whatever preventative action is reasonable, change the workers hours or conditions of work to avoid the risk, offer her alternative work or, if neither is possible, give her paid leave from work for as long as is necessary to protect her health and safety. This may also include offering day work to pregnant workers on the night shift if medically necessary.

In order to be covered by these regulations the employer must be informed in writing that the worker is pregnant and the employer may also request a certificate from the Doctor or Midwife confirming the pregnancy.

Alternative Work

Any alternative work offered as a result must be appropriate and suitable and on terms and conditions not substantially less favourable than her normal terms and conditions. Any worker who suffers a detriment as a result of raising a health and safety concern can take a case to an Industrial Tribunal.

Where no suitable alternative work is available the woman is entitled to be suspended from work on full pay for as long as necessary to protect the health and safety of both mother and child.

Risk Assessment

The regulations also cover women trying to become pregnant. Employers must carry out a risk assessment in relation to agents, processes and working conditions which could jeopardise the health and safety of new or expectant mothers (and unborn children or children being breast fed), when there are women of childbearing capacity in the workforce. Women employees should be told of any risks, if they become pregnant, or are breast feeding, or could be in the future. The Safety Rep must also be informed

HSE guidance

The HSE has produced guidance on hazards to new and expectant mothers. This identifies the factors that employers need to consider in making their risk assessments.

Physical agents such as shock, vibration or other movements; manual handling of loads; noise; ionising and non-ionising radiation; temperature extremes; postures and movements that cause mental and or physical fatigue; hyperbaric (high pressure) atmospheres.

Biological agents such as bacteria, viruses and other micro-organisms known to cause adverse human health effects. These include hepatitis B, HIV, herpes, TB, syphilis, chickenpox and typhoid. And especially those known to cause abortion or physical/neurological damage, eg rubella (German measles), toxoplasma, chlamydia in sheep, and cytomegalovirus (part of the herpes family).

Chemical agents such as mercury, lead, substances absorbed through the skin, cytotoxic drugs, carbon monoxide and chemicals labelled with the following risk phrases:

R40: possible risk of irreversible effects

R45: may cause cancer

R46: may cause heritable genetic damage

R61: may cause harm to the unborn child

R63: possible risk of harm to unborn child

R64: may cause harm to breast fed babies.

Other Regulations

Pregnant or breast feeding workers are also covered by the Workplace Regs which require suitable rest facilities to be provided. Furthermore, although it is not a legal requirement, employers should consider providing a safe and healthy environment for workers who are breast feeding to express and store milk. Under the regulations rest rooms and rest areas should also include arrangements to protect non-smokers from discomfort caused by tobacco smoke which may affect the birth weight and health of the unborn child of an exposed mother.

Other regulations also cover pregnant women, or women or may become pregnant and should be consulted. These are the Manual Handling Regs, which make special provisions for pregnant women in relation to lifting and carrying, and the CHIP Regs which cover the labelling of hazardous substances and data sheets.