Ergonomics and Manual Handling

06.02.02

– Manual handling

New or expectant mothers in the workplace >

This information bulletin provides information for the employer to assist in reducing the risk of injury to new and expectant mothers. The information provided pertains to potential problems only. As with all health issues, individual variation is expected. In no way does this information replace proper medical advice.

Pregnancy and child birth are a normal part of a woman's life and should not be equated with ill health. There are very few jobs which present health risks for the pregnant woman, however the significant changes that occur during and after pregnancy can increase the chances of occupational injury.

The law

The *Workplace Health and Safety Act* requires employers to identify hazards, assess their risk and control these risks such that all employees are protected. This includes the new or expectant mother. Although there are some extra safety implications for new or expectant mothers, these can be adequately addressed by normal health and safety management procedures.

Under the *Anti-Discrimination Act* it is illegal for anyone to discriminate against persons on the basis of pregnancy, parenthood or breastfeeding. It is also discrimination if an employer imposes an unreasonable requirement on an employee which she cannot meet because of her pregnancy or child bearing capacity.

Although there is no legal requirement for pregnant employees to notify their employers, this is often a good idea as it allows the employer to act on potential hazards earlier. The new or expectant mother has a responsibility for her own safety and must consider whether or not disclosing such information is in the interest of protecting her own health.

What's so special about pregnant women?

Many changes occur to the body during pregnancy. Some of these changes are obvious, and some of them are not so obvious. An employer has the responsibility to ensure a healthy working environment for ***all*** workers and should be aware of the risks to pregnant women and new mothers

Postural changes

As the abdomen distends, the centre of gravity is moved forward. This change in body shape can sometimes affect balance and limit the workers ability to work in awkward areas. The exaggerated curve in the lower back can lead to discomfort from prolonged standing or sitting. It may become increasingly difficult to perform manual handling tasks as abdominal size increases.

Hormonal changes

Some hormones are released from early stages of pregnancy. Their function is to relax the soft tissues around the pelvis to allow the birth canal to expand when the child is delivered. Unfortunately, hormones travel via the blood stream and therefore don't just affect the pelvis. All of the joints are involved. They become increasingly mobile and hence the whole body becomes more prone to injury during the course of the pregnancy and for up to six months afterwards. Hormonal changes are also responsible for morning sickness which can be experienced in varying degrees and may affect work performance on early shifts.

Fatigue

The extra physical burden of pregnancy often contributes to fatigue. This can be made worse by excessive hours of work and exposure to a hot working environment. Many expectant employees report the most fatigue in the first 3 months and/or the late stages of pregnancy. New mothers may also experience fatigue while adjusting to the waking patterns of their child. ***As well as the bodily changes that are occurring, there are also some physical agents that the new or expectant mother should avoid.***

Shocks or vibration

Regular exposure to shocks and to low frequency vibration (e.g. off road driving, horseriding) may increase the likelihood of miscarriage. Where uncomfortable whole body vibration is occurring, that aspect of the occupation is best avoided by the pregnant employee.

Heat

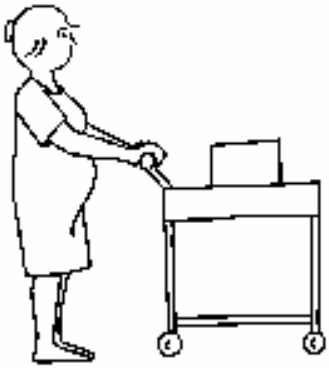
Pregnant workers are less tolerant of high temperatures. They are more prone to fainting and heat stress which **can** be dangerous for both the mother and child. Care should be taken when exposed to heat for prolonged periods. Drinking water must be readily available.

Prolonged postures and movements

Fatigue from standing and other physical work has long been associated with problems of pregnancy. Well designed seating should be provided where possible and regular rest breaks encouraged. Where possible workers themselves should be given some control over how their work is organised such that the hours, volume and pacing of their work is not excessive. The opportunity to make regular position changes is important.

Manual handling

Postural and hormonal changes affect the workers susceptibility to injury from manual handling both during and for some time after their pregnancy. The principals of good manual handling are outlined in other NT WorkSafe information bulletins Series 6 Ergonomics and manual handling.The new or expectant mother should pay particular attention to lifting technique and wherever possible use a mechanical aid. The additional size of her abdomen will prevent the employee from holding the load close to the body. The additional weight of the pregnancy increases the load on the lumbar spine. Where repetitive lifting or manual handling is unavoidable and the task cannot be feasibly redesigned, the pregnant worker may need to be reassigned. This may only be necessary in late stage pregnancy.



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