

Health & Safety Issues

For pregnant women in the workplace.

Overview

Mothers-to-be, new mothers and breastfeeding women have important legal rights in the workplace. This factsheet gives an overview of this special protection and the considerable responsibilities it places on the force.

General duty to assess risks

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 oblige every force to conduct a general risk assessment if their officers include women of childbearing age. This includes women from their teens to their forties or later, so in practice every force is affected.

The assessment should consider if there are any potential workplace risks to pregnant women, new mothers (those returning to work up to six months following the birth) or women who are breastfeeding.

Officers must be made fully aware of any risks identified and the measures proposed to reduce, remove or control them.

Special duty to new and expectant mothers

In addition to this general risk assessment, your force must make a more specific assessment when you tell them you are pregnant.

This assessment relates solely to the individual officer. The Health and Safety Executive publish guidance on their website on this issue for new and expectant mothers who work: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/mothers>.

You should notify your force of your pregnancy as soon as possible. The force is not legally bound to make this specific assessment until they receive this notification. The force may also request written proof of pregnancy, which can be obtained from your GP or midwife.

Once this written notification is received, the force must investigate whether your working conditions involve any potential risks to your health, to the health of your baby or to the breastfeeding process. The force must also take into account any medical advice you have received.

For instance, if you are suffering from a pregnancy-related medical condition, such as pre-eclampsia, or have a history of miscarriages, you might be advised to take more frequent rest breaks or to avoid stress. Your force will then be legally obliged to make adjustments to your working patterns or conditions to meet these needs.

In any event, if a force recruits any woman of child bearing age and the work is of a specific kind which could involve risk to the health and safety of a new or expectant mother, or her baby.

For example because of working conditions, the force should not wait until the officer is pregnant before carrying out the risk assessment.

Risk assessment

The assessment must specifically examine your workstation and other physical aspects of the workplace. Working hours and workload should also be taken into account. This comprehensive review of your work conditions will include:

- Mental and physical fatigue
- Hours and times of work
- Handling of heavy loads
- Movements and postures
- Shock and vibration
- Travelling requirements
- Noise
- Extremes of temperature (hot or cold).



Outcome of risk assessment

When a risk is highlighted, the force must advise you and take action to remove the risk or minimise its effects. If this is not possible, the force must change your working conditions or hours of work so you can avoid the risk.

If a sufficiently serious risk cannot be removed, you must be offered either suitable alternative work (on equivalent or better terms and conditions), or suspension on full pay until the risk is eliminated.

It is quite usual for a force to place an officer on restricted duties for the period that she is pregnant and/or is breastfeeding.

Continue overleaf >

Night work

Sometimes a GP or midwife will advise you that continuing to work at night puts your health - or that of your unborn child at risk. In this case, the force is legally obliged to take you off night duties. Ideally, you should be given suitable daytime work instead, without any loss of status, pay or other benefits. If this is not possible, you will need to be suspended on full pay for as long as necessary to avoid the risks posed by night working.

Antenatal appointments

As a pregnant woman, you have the right not to be unreasonably refused paid time off work to attend antenatal appointments. These include medical consultations with a GP, a midwife, a health visitor or at a hospital. The right also extends to antenatal, parenting and even relaxation classes, if a GP or midwife has advised you to attend them.

There is no set minimum or maximum time allowed. It is unlawful for a force unreasonably to refuse time off to attend antenatal appointments. Your force may require proof of appointments, such as an appointment card or a health professional's letter.



Breastfeeding

On or before returning to work after maternity leave, if you provide your force with written notification that you are breastfeeding, the force must again arrange a specific individual risk assessment as outlined overleaf.

The force must also provide a rest place at work if you are pregnant or breastfeeding. It is also recommended that a private, clean and safe place with fridge facilities is made available if you wish to express milk (although this is not a legal requirement).

Employment Tribunal claims

The law relating to pregnant officers, new mothers returning from maternity leave and breastfeeding at work is complex. This factsheet can only highlight some of the possible issues you need to be aware of which may give rise to a claim. The best option is to get specific advice relating to your own circumstances. If the force has not complied with its obligations, it is possible that a claim for maternity discrimination could be made because unfavourable treatment due to pregnancy, childbirth or maternity leave is unlawful. Maternity discrimination is a specific form of sex discrimination and can occur in all of the below situations:

Possible claims might include the following:

- Dismissing or subjecting a woman to a detriment because of her pregnancy, childbirth or maternity leave is unlawful
- Failing to conduct a risk assessment, or failing to deal appropriately with the risks identified, can be unlawful
- Women who have been unjustly prevented from attending antenatal appointments or who were forced to take unpaid time off can have a claim for the lost pay.

Please note that in most cases, any claim would need to be lodged no later than three months less one day from the act of discrimination.

If you need further assistance, in the first instance please contact your local Joint Branch Board.

W: www.slatergordon.co.uk/policelaw

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