



Working During Pregnancy

These days, more mothers-to-be are working right up until a few days, or even a few hours, before they go into labor. The fact that fewer than 40 percent of working women in the United States get paid pregnancy leave may have something to do with this trend. In fact, the U.S. is one of only a handful of developed countries that doesn't guarantee paid pregnancy leave to working women. That's the bad news. The good news is that most women, depending on a few key factors, can actually work through their pregnancies without jeopardizing their -- or their baby's -- health.

Can I work while I'm pregnant?

Probably, but that depends on many factors you should discuss in detail with your doctor, and perhaps your employer. If you're free from any medical conditions and experiencing a normal, low-risk pregnancy (and if your job isn't hazardous, strenuous, or overly stressful), you can most likely continue to go to work throughout your pregnancy.

Is it okay to work right up until I go into labor?

If your pregnancy is going along smoothly and your job isn't causing any problems for you or the baby, chances are you can work right up until your baby arrives if that's what you want to do. Keep in mind, however, that you will likely experience more fatigue and back pain toward the end of your pregnancy, so try to go easy on yourself. If you can afford to take a little time off before your due date, you may just want to take advantage of what will be your last "alone time" for quite a while.

Are there reasons why I might need to stop working or cut back on my work?

If your job is hazardous, excessively strenuous, or potentially harmful to the fetus's health, your doctor may recommend that you limit your working hours, ask for a different assignment at work, or stop working altogether.

If you have a health problem such as diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, back trouble, or high blood pressure, or if you've had problems with past pregnancies, your doctor may want to restrict what you do both on and off the job. Be sure to discuss all of your health issues with your doctor and ask specifically how they may affect your ability to do your job during your pregnancy.

Similarly, if your developing baby has a condition that could be adversely affected by the strain or stress of working, your doctor may recommend that you make changes. Women who are carrying twins or other multiples may also have to stop working earlier than planned.

What kinds of jobs might be considered unsafe for a pregnant woman?

Any job that exposes you to substances proven harmful to a fetus -- including pesticides, some cleaning solvents, lead, and certain chemicals -- can be extremely dangerous. Industries that are considered potentially risky for pregnant women include farming, health care, some factory work, dry cleaners, printing, some crafts businesses (such as painting and pottery glazing), highway or tollbooth jobs (where workers breathe in high levels of lead and carbon monoxide from car exhaust), and the electronics industry. Health-care workers may be exposed to other substances harmful to a developing baby, such as chemotherapy drugs, x-rays, organic mercury and other chemicals, as well as many viruses and bacteria.

Teachers and childcare providers who are constantly exposed to many viruses and bacteria may also be at risk. People in those professions can decrease their germ exposure through frequent hand washing. Likewise, restaurant and bar workers who breathe in a lot of secondhand smoke on the job may also be putting their babies at risk. Your employer may be able to offer you extra protections, or temporarily reassign you to other tasks.

Federal law requires your employer to inform you about any toxic agents you may be exposed to on the premises, and to protect the health and safety of pregnant women. If you believe you're being denied that protection, you may want to contact one of the agencies listed at the end of this article.

Should I continue working if my job is very physically demanding?

This is another issue you should discuss at length with your doctor. While moderate exercise is good for you and your baby, too much hard work can definitely be harmful. If your job requires heavy lifting -- generally defined as more than 25 pounds on a regular basis -- climbing, or prolonged standing or walking, your doctor may suggest that you work fewer hours or stop performing certain tasks. Remember that the extra weight and your growing belly can affect your balance and may cause falls. In the earlier stages of your pregnancy, nausea and dizziness can also increase your chance of injury, especially if your job is very physical.

The jury is still out on how much physical exertion at work is safe during pregnancy. According to a review of 29 studies involving more than 160,000 pregnant women, physically demanding work raised the chances of a woman having a preterm birth by 22 percent and increased her chances of having hypertension or preeclampsia during her pregnancy by 60 percent. Prolonged standing on the job also increased the risk of preterm birth (before 37 weeks) by 26 percent, according to the study published in the journal of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in April 2000. Nevertheless, a

study published in 2005 did not find a link between physically demanding work and adverse pregnancy outcomes. So, if you are allowed to take sufficient breaks and minimize heavy lifting and climbing at your job, you may be able to continue your work without posing risks to yourself or your baby.

Be sure to ask your doctor for advice. According to a report by the American Medical Association, “physical activities at work, such as prolonged standing, bending, or shift work, pose the greatest hazard when present in combination and in circumstances where women have limited opportunity for rest.”

I’ve heard that the rays emitted by a computer monitor can harm a fetus. Is that true?

During the 1980s, when computers were beginning to make their way into the lives of average Americans, there was much concern about whether the energy emitted from video display terminals (VDTs) could be harmful to fetuses. Several studies have since shown that the electromagnetic field (EMF) energy released by computers does not pose a risk, but scientists continue to investigate the overall and long-term effects of exposure to higher levels EMF (such as from outdoor power lines) today.

How can I keep comfortable and safeguard my and my baby’s health on the job?

Even if your job is easy and hazard-free, you’re still going to experience some discomfort and fatigue while working during your pregnancy. The American Medical Association recommends that employers accommodate a woman's increased physical requirements during pregnancy by allowing her to take breaks every few hours, with a longer meal break every four hours.

There are also steps you can take to stay as comfortable as possible. For example, to prevent back pain, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that you wear low-heeled shoes with good support and make sure you have a chair with good back support. (You can also tuck a small pillow behind your lower back.) Try wearing support stockings, which will prevent swelling in your legs and may decrease the odds of getting varicose veins.

If you have to sit for long periods of time, propping up your feet on a footrest -- even a wastebasket or telephone book -- will help your circulation. You should try to avoid crossing your legs because it impedes circulation and may promote varicose veins. Also keep in mind that pregnant women are more susceptible to carpal tunnel syndrome, so if you use a keyboard a lot, adjust the height of your chair so that your forearms are level with the keyboard. And remember to give your hands and wrists a rest by taking regular breaks.

In addition, pregnant women should never skip meals and should drink plenty of water. Keep a full glass at your desk at all times to remind you to drink enough, and use bathroom breaks to take a short walk or do some stretches. (Varying your position is a great way to combat fatigue, too.)

If your job requires you to stand for long periods of time, try resting one foot on a stool or box. Sit down often on your breaks. If that's not possible, or if your feet and legs swell anyways, support stockings will help.

By taking a few precautions and listening to your body, you can ensure a healthy and productive nine months on the job.

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