

## REPRODUCTIVE HAZARDS IN THE WORKPLACE

# A fact sheet for warehouse workers

Working in a warehouse can pose many health and safety risks to workers, including those caused by long hours on one's feet, heavy lifting, repetitive motion, chemical exposures, and the use of ladders, forklifts, and pallet jacks.

Many of these hazards create an even greater hazard to workers who are pregnant or breast-feeding, or even to those planning to conceive.

### Heavy Lifting

During pregnancy, changes in ligaments and in your center of gravity can make you even more prone to injury. This makes heavy lifting during pregnancy particularly hazardous as it can lead to either injury of the pregnant woman, or to miscarriage or premature birth.

You can decrease your risk of injury by using safe lifting techniques to the extent feasible. Follow these tips from Washington State Department of Labor & Industries in English and Spanish. [lni.wa.gov/forms-publications/f417-055-909.pdf](https://lni.wa.gov/forms-publications/f417-055-909.pdf)

There are also some published guidelines for lifting restrictions during pregnancy, including those in the links below. You should talk to your healthcare provider about appropriate limits for lifting during your pregnancy.

**English:** <https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2013/05/13/womens-health-at-work/>

**Spanish:** [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/images/MaternalLiftingInfographic-sp.jpg](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/repro/images/MaternalLiftingInfographic-sp.jpg)

### Long Hours and Shift Work

Excessive fatigue can lead to reproductive difficulty in all employees, and prolonged standing during pregnancy can cause miscarriage or premature birth. In addition, the disruption of circadian rhythm caused by shift work has also been shown to affect women's reproductive health.

### Propane Forklifts

Exposure of pregnant women to carbon monoxide (CO), which is present in the exhaust from propane forklifts and heaters, is especially hazardous to the fetus because it displaces oxygen in the blood. If your employer has propane forklifts, find out if they are maintaining the forklift engines to minimize the CO in the exhaust. You might even suggest a switch to electric forklifts, if possible.



Photo: iStock.com/alvarez

**SHIP**  
Grant Program

Safety and Health  
Investment Projects  
[SafetyGrants.Lni.wa.gov](http://SafetyGrants.Lni.wa.gov)

Funding and support provided by the Department of Labor & Industries

Funding and support for this project have been provided by the State of Washington, Department of Labor & Industries, Safety & Health Investment Projects.

## Cleaning Products and Disinfectants

Cleaning products are one of the largest sources of chemical exposure to workers in the United States, and as more workplaces have implemented cleaning protocols for Covid-19, the number of workers exposed and the frequency of exposure has increased significantly. Those assigned to regular cleaning and disinfection duties will have much more exposure and be at higher risk than those who are not directly involved with cleaning or only clean occasionally.

Many cleaners and disinfectants are reproductive health hazards, and routine exposure to pregnant women should definitely be minimized. Labels and SDSs do not always provide much information about the reproductive health hazards of chemicals, but a good source of information is ChemHAT. This is an online database that you can search for hazard information and for suggestions for safer alternatives. When you go to <https://chemhat.org>, you can search by chemical name and a page about the chemical's hazards will come up. The symbols and statements below are examples of what might come up for something that is a reproductive health hazard. ChemHAT includes hazard information about chemicals that may cause harm through breast milk.

Chemicals that have known reproductive hazards are listed on California's Prop 65 list.

## Chemical Leaks and Spills

Even if you don't work directly with hazardous chemicals in your job, warehouse workers may store, handle, or ship hazardous chemicals in

closed containers. If these containers leak or spill in the warehouse, workers may be exposed and may be responsible for cleaning up the spill. You should be trained by warehouse management regarding the specific hazards that may be present in the facility and on what to do if there is a spill. Never attempt to clean up a spill if you are not trained to do so safely.

## Protecting Yourself and Your Family

- Talk with your employer about the hazards in the workplace that might affect your ability to conceive or harm your child if you are planning to have children. If you feel comfortable, ask your employer, your labor representative, or your company's safety officer about the types of hazards for your specific job tasks and how you can stay safe while doing your job.
- See our reproductive hazards checklist at <https://deohs.washington.edu/pehsu/occrepro>.
- If you work with chemicals, your employer is required to make Safety Data Sheets (SDSs) for all chemicals available to you on site. Many SDSs are also posted on the product manufacturer's website, and are helpful if you want to identify reproductive chemical hazards in your workplace. The SDSs will describe the hazards of the chemicals and how to use them safely. Although SDSs use scientific terms, recent changes to the Hazard Communication standard have made SDSs easier to understand. Product manufacturers must identify hazards on SDSs using pictograms. There is no



**Birth Defects**—can cause harm to the developing child, including birth defects, low birth weight, and biological or behavioral problems that appear as the child grows.



**Gene Damage**—can cause or increase the rate of mutations, which are changes in genetic material in cells.



**Reproductive Harm**—can disrupt the male or female reproductive systems, changing sexual development, behavior or functions, decreasing fertility, or resulting in loss of the fetus during pregnancy.



**Endocrine Disruption**—can interfere with hormone communication between cells, which controls metabolism, development, growth, reproduction and behavior (the endocrine system).

specific pictogram for reproductive hazards. If a product contains a reproductive hazard, the pictogram for health hazards would be on the SDS and the product label along with one of the reproductive hazard statements listed below:



*May damage fertility or the unborn child*

*Suspected of damaging fertility or the unborn child*

*May cause harm to breast-fed children*

- Ask your employer if you can use cleaning and disinfecting products that contain the US EPA's Safer Choice and Design for the Environment labels.
- Use the UW DEOHS Reproductive Health Toolkit to learn more about how work can affect your ability to have healthy children.  
[deohs.washington.edu/pehsu/occrepro](http://deohs.washington.edu/pehsu/occrepro)
- If the company has done testing to evaluate workplace hazards (e.g., measuring the concentration of chemicals in the air), this may mean that higher exposures are likely. You have a right to see the results of the measurements and should share them with your healthcare provider.
- Provide any information you get from your employer to your healthcare provider and discuss the risks of your work.

## Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE is equipment worn by workers to protect them from hazards in the workplace and includes gloves, protective clothing, safety glasses, ear-plugs, and respirators. PPE has a lot of limitations and should only be required for protection from hazards in the workplace that cannot be controlled using more effective controls, such as substitution, ventilation, barriers, safety procedures, etc. Sometimes, however, PPE is required of all workers in order to minimize exposure to a hazard. Even when PPE may not be required for all exposed workers, PPE might be necessary to protect the workers who are pregnant or planning to conceive. If you wear a respirator at work, your

employer must have a respiratory protection program that includes a medical evaluation to make sure you can safely wear a respirator, fit testing, and training on the use and care of your respirator. During pregnancy, you may need a different size respirator or other PPE due to changes in body weight and shape.

## Your Rights

Your employer must protect the health and safety of all employees under the OSHA Act—even those most vulnerable. Health and safety programs, including required exposure monitoring and most personal protective equipment, must be provided free of charge.

It is illegal for your employer to discriminate against you because of pregnancy, childbirth, or a medical condition related to childbirth. For more information about your rights, visit the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission at: [www.eeoc.gov/pregnancy-discrimination#:~:text=The%20Pregnancy%20Discrimination%20Act%2\(P-DA,term%20or%20condition%20of%20employment.](http://www.eeoc.gov/pregnancy-discrimination#:~:text=The%20Pregnancy%20Discrimination%20Act%2(P-DA,term%20or%20condition%20of%20employment.)

The Center for WorkLife Law's free legal hotline provides information to employees and their clinicians about their legal rights.

Email [hotline@worklifelaw.org](mailto:hotline@worklifelaw.org)  
[www.pregnantatwork.org/about/](http://www.pregnantatwork.org/about/)  
Call 415-703-8276



Photo: iStock.com/Medvedkov