

Independent Guide

New and expectant mothers at work? - what should I have in place?



Independent workplace compliance

Introduction

Pregnancy is a part of everyday life. Many women work while pregnant, and many return to work while they are still breastfeeding. New and expectant mothers' health and safety can be adequately addressed by normal health and safety management. One element of a good safety management system is to perform a risk assessment on new and expectant mothers, to identify any hazards in the workplace that may affect their health and safety.

Why is it so important?

In many workplaces, including office environments, there are hazards which may affect the health and safety of new and expectant mothers and of their children. Before pregnancy the working conditions may have been acceptable, but they may need re-assessing during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.

Legislation

It is a legal requirement under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations to assess risks to new and expectant mothers. Once risks have been assessed it is a requirement for the employer to do everything reasonably practicable to control the risks.

What is a risk assessment for new and expectant mothers?

A risk assessment for new and expectant mothers is simply a method to determine any risks which the mother would be exposed to in her workplace. Your workplace risk assessment should already consider any risks to female employees of childbearing age and, in particular risk from working conditions or the use of physical, chemical or biological agents. When you are informed of an employee who is pregnant, breast feeding or has given birth within the last six months, you should check to see if any new risks have arisen. This is accomplished by looking at the factors in her work activities which could cause harm to her or her child. From this assessment, precautions can be determined to ensure that risks are reduced and to prevent any harm being realised.

The first step of the assessment is to identify any hazards to which pregnant women may be exposed. In an office environment such risks would include inadequately designed workstations, manual handling activities and lone working, other workplaces may be more hazardous to the worker. Once hazards are identified it is necessary to decide who may be harmed; namely the mother, the child or both. It is necessary to evaluate the risks from the identified hazards and to decide on the precautions necessary to reduce the risks. The next step is to record the findings and detail the actions taken, and to inform the relevant personnel of those actions. Finally, it is necessary to keep the assessment under review as the pregnancy develops, to determine whether the precautions in place are still relevant and whether there has been any change in the workplace or work activities.

As with any risk assessment, it needs to be suitable and sufficient to ensure that the risks are clearly identified. It is essential that the person conducting the risk assessment is competent to carry out the task and has access to relevant information and support.

How can any risks be reduced?

In most office environments reducing the risks is a fairly straightforward exercise. For example, it may be necessary to ensure that the mother has adequate breaks from display screen equipment, to ensure comfort and a change of posture. Simple policies such as not undertaking any manual handling of boxes or files whilst pregnant will help reduce the risks associated with this activity. In other job roles where more significant risks are identified more adjustment to her role may be needed such as alternative work or, a suspension on paid leave. Ultimately, reducing any risks to new and expectant mothers requires good management as part of an adequate safety management system.

References

A Guide for New and Expectant Mothers Who Work INDG373. 04/13 (www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg373.pdf).

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting. Assurity Consulting is the UK's leading independent compliance consultancy specialising in workplace health, safety and environmental solutions. We have over 30 years' experience of helping customers of all sizes, from across all sectors, manage their compliance responsibilities, making sure that their organisation is compliant, their employees are safe, their processes are cost effective and their management team is in control.



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