Booklet	
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"If I'm Pregnant, Can the Chemicals I Work With Harm My Baby?"

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"If I'm Pregnant, Can the Chemicals I Work With Harm My Baby?"

If you are pregnant, or planning a pregnancy, you may worry that exposure to chemicals at work will harm your baby. Concern about workplace chemicals is understandable, especially since doctors encourage women not to expose the baby to other chemicals such as those found in tobacco smoke and alcohol. Most women probably don't need to worry. But if you use chemicals often at work, you should get more information about them.

This factsheet will help you sort out what to do when you are concerned about workplace hazards to pregnancy and tells you what information you need to gather.

"Do I need to be worried?"

If you use chemicals often at work, you should find out what they are and then find out if your exposure to them might harm you or your baby. This fact sheet provides tips on how to do this.

Many women will find out that they don't need to worry. In some cases, a woman isn't working with chemicals that will harm the baby. For example, working with strong acids, strong bases, or other strongly irritating chemicals is not likely to harm your baby. In other cases, exposures are too brief or too small to create a hazard. For example, occasional exposures to small amounts of substances such as paint fumes or roofing tar fumes also are not likely to harm your baby.

"What harmful effects can chemicals have on my pregnancy?"

Some chemicals can cause miscarriage, slow down the growth of the baby, or cause birth defects.

During the first three months of pregnancy the organs and limbs are being formed. This is the period in which the baby is most sensitive to chemicals which cause birth defects.

During the last six months of pregnancy, exposures to harmful chemicals can slow down the growth of the baby or affect brain development, but are less likely to cause physical birth defects. If growth is slowed down, the baby may weigh less than normal at birth. Low-birth-weight babies are more likely to get sick during their first year of life.

Because you may not know that you are pregnant during the first three months, *it is important to find out about workplace hazards before you get pregnant*. See "For More Information"on page 4 and "Things You Need to Find Out"on the insert for help in doing this.

"What makes a chemical hazardous to my baby?"

Whether your baby is affected depends on several things. The most important are:

- **What chemicals you use.**

Some chemicals can harm your baby, but many cannot.

- **How much, how often, and how long you are exposed.**

In general, the less you are exposed, the less chance that you or your baby will be affected.

- **Whether the chemical gets into your body and reaches the baby.**

To harm your baby, a chemical must get into your body, be absorbed into your blood, and reach the baby.

"How do chemicals enter the body and reach the baby?"

Chemicals can enter your body through the air you breathe, through contact with your skin, or through your digestive system if you accidentally swallow them. Your baby is exposed if the chemical passes from your blood, through the placenta, to the baby.

Some chemicals (like most of the ones listed in the box) are strong irritants which react with the first tissue they contact - usually your eyes, nose, throat, or skin. Very little of these chemicals enters the bloodstream. Therefore they are unlikely to affect other parts of your body, including the baby.

Other chemicals, however, can be absorbed into the blood stream. Some of them can be harmful to the baby. Because there are so many considerations involved, it is not possible to list here all the chemicals that can be harmful to pregnancy.

Some Common Chemicals
Which Are Unlikely to Harm Your Baby

ammonia	potassium hydroxide
chlorine	sodium hypochlorite (bleach)
hydrochloric acid	asbestos
nitric acid	fiberglass
sulfuric acid	silica
sodium hydroxide	

"How do I figure out if the chemicals that I work with will harm my baby?"

Your employer is responsible for finding out about workplace hazards to pregnancy, telling you about the hazards, and protecting you from these hazards as much as possible. Unfortunately, not every employer fulfills these responsibilities. Sometimes, you may not get all the information you need from your employer, or you may not be able to understand it. You may even feel uncomfortable asking your boss for this information. In these situations, you'll need to get help from a doctor, nurse, genetics counselor, or other health professional. However, before anyone can help you, you need to:

Find out what chemicals you work with: Ask your supervisor for the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for the products you use. The MSDS is a form which lists the hazardous ingredients in a product. Your employer is required by law to give you a copy of the MSDS, if you ask for it. Your employer also must give this information to your doctor if it is requested. By law you have the right to know what chemicals you work with and what their hazards are. Your employer has the legal responsibility to give you this information and to train you to use the chemicals safely (California General Industry Safety Orders Section 5194).

Find out how much, for how long, and how often you are exposed to these chemicals: Ask your supervisor if the levels of chemicals in your work area air have been measured. If monitoring has been done, you have a legal right to see the results (California GISO 3204). Most of the time this information will not be available. In these situations, your exposure can be roughly estimated by answering the questions on the worksheet, "Things You Need to Find Out," on the insert.

After you have completed the worksheet on the insert, share this information with your doctor, or other health professional, such as a nurse or genetics counselor. If your health care provider needs help determining if there is a problem, suggest that he or she consult with a board-certified occupational

medicine physician.

Even when you know what chemicals you work with, and how much you are exposed to, it may not be possible to answer your question, "Will the chemicals I work with harm my baby?" We simply don't know whether many chemicals can affect pregnancy. *The best way to protect yourself and your unborn baby is to keep your exposure to all chemicals as low as possible*.

"How can I reduce my exposure?"

Exposure to hazardous chemicals can be reduced in several ways:

- Replace hazardous chemicals with safer ones.

This is the best way to reduce hazardous chemical exposure. However, a safer substitute is not always available, or your employer may not be willing to make a change. Also, check to make sure the substitute is truly safer.

- **Use safe work practices.**

Store chemicals in sealed containers when not in use. Do not eat, drink, or smoke in work areas. Avoid skin contact with chemicals. If chemicals are spilled on you, change out of contaminated clothing and wash yourself with soap and water.

- **Improve workplace ventilation.**

Ventilation removes contaminated or stale air and brings in clean air. The best type of ventilation is a "hood" over the source of exposure, which takes away contaminated air *before* it reaches the air you breathe. If hoods are not in place, it is especially important to have good room ventilation systems which bring in fresh outside air to dilute the chemicals in the workroom air. Most workers do not have much control over the ventilation in their workplaces. However, if you think the ventilation system in your work area is not effective in reducing your exposure, find out if it is always turned on when you are using chemicals or if it can be "turned up." If you do not have any kind of ventilation system in your work area, opening windows and doors may help.

- **Ask about the use of personal protective equipment**.

You may be able to wear personal protective equipment such as gloves or a respirator to reduce your exposure. An industrial hygienist or other knowledgeable person should be consulted when choosing protective equipment. Before using a respirator, a pregnant woman should be evaluated by an occupational health physician.

"Can I keep working if I can't be sure it is safe for my baby?"

Whether you continue to work during pregnancy is a personal decision. It is often a tough decision to make. Look into your different choices. You may be able to transfer to a different job without chemical exposure. Or, you may be able to continue working but take steps to reduce your exposure to harmful chemicals. Some women choose to stop working, but this may not be the best choice for you. Your family may not be able to afford eight or nine months without a paycheck and health insurance.

Once you have made a decision and done what you can to avoid exposure to toxic chemicals, try not to worry about it. If you can, relax and enjoy your pregnancy.

"Do I have any rights as a pregnant worker?"

Yes. There are laws protecting pregnant workers from discrimination. The laws also provide for limited disability and unemployment benefits, and for unpaid leave for whatever period your doctor determines that you are disabled, up to four months. These laws will not solve all the problems that you may face, but they may help. Some employers offer benefits in addition to those required by law. Find out if your employer provides other benefits. Any benefits available to other temporarily disabled employees must be available to employees disabled due to pregnancy. For information on your legal rights, or help with a specific problem, see "For More Information"on page 4.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

Yes. It is important to remember that working with chemicals is only one of many things which can affect your pregnancy. Two factors that have a big effect on your baby are nutrition (what you eat) and seeing your doctor regularly during your pregnancy. Take care of yourself. Eat well and start seeing your doctor early in your pregnancy.

Hazards to Pregnancy from Specific Chemicals:

Drugs and Infectious Agents

- Your doctor or other health professional
- California Teratogen Information Service - Pregnancy Risk Information Line (800) 532-3749

A statewide program which offers information to pregnant women and their physicians about the effects that drugs, viruses, and physical agents can have on the unborn child.

Exposure to Chemicals Outside the Workplace

Poison Control – California (800) 222-1222

Workplace Exposures

- Your doctor or other health professional
- Your company doctor
- Material Safety Data Sheets

When Your Doctor or Other Health Professional Needs Assistance

- A board-certified occupational medicine physician

Workplace Health and Safety Regulations, or To File a Complaint:

- California Division of Occupational Safety and Health ("Cal/OSHA")

Cal/OSHA is responsible for workplace health and safety in California. It establishes Permissible Exposure Limits (PELs) for the amounts of certain chemicals in workroom air. You have a right to a safe and healthy workplace. If you feel you are being overexposed to a chemical, you can file a complaint with Cal/OSHA. See "State Government Offices, Industrial Relations, Occupational Safety and Health"in the Government section of the white pages of your local phone book.

- Your union

Safe Handling Procedures for Chemicals, and Ways of Reducing Your Exposure:

- Material Safety Data Sheets
- Your company health and safety officer or industrial hygienist or your supervisor

Your union

- Cal/OSHA Consultation *(for employers only)*

A non-enforcement program of Cal/OSHA. Provides free assistance to employers in the evaluation and control of workplace health and safety hazards. Employers should see "State Government Offices, Industrial Relations, Occupational Safety and Health"in the Government section of the white pages.

Your Legal Rights:

Disability Benefits and Unemployment Benefits

- Employment Development Department (EDD)

See "State Government"listings in the Government section at the front of the white pages of the phone book.

Unpaid Pregnancy Disability Leave

- Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH)

See "State Government Offices" in the Government section of the white pages.

If You Feel You Have Been Discriminated Against Because You Are Pregnant

- Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH)

See "State Government Offices"in the Government section of the white pages. In some cases, a complaint may be forwarded to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

This worksheet is for women who use chemicals regularly at work.

Instructions: Read the questions below and collect the information you need to answer them. Share the information you collect with your doctor or other health professional, such as a nurse or genetics counselor. He or she can help you determine if the chemicals you work with can harm your unborn baby. If your health care provider needs help determining if there is a problem, suggest that he or she consult with a board-certified occupational medicine physician. See "For More Information"on page 4 for others who can help.

1. Are you currently employed? _____

2. What job do you do?_____

Describe it.

3. What does your company manufacture, or what kind of services does it provide?

4. What are the names of the chemicals in the products you work with?

(Brand names aren't very helpful. Sometimes a product label has ingredient information, but often the information on labels is incomplete and unreliable. The best way to find out what chemicals are in the product(s) you use is to get a copy of the *Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS)* for that product from your employer. The MSDS is a form which lists the hazardous ingredients in a product. *Your employer is required by law (General Industry Safety Orders [GISO] 5194) to give you a copy of the MSDS, if you ask for it. Your employer must also give this information to your doctor if it is requested.* Write the ingredients down on a piece of paper, or better yet, attach a copy of the MSDS to this sheet.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. How do you use these chemicals?

Which ones do you use most frequently?

How often? _____

For how long each time? _____

How much do you use each time? _____

Do other people in your area use them too? _____

How many other people? _____

6. Are any of these chemicals heated? _____

If yes, to what temperature? _____

Which ones?

7. Can you smell or taste any chemical fumes or vapors where you work? _____ If yes, which ones?

8. Do you feel sick when you work with any of the chemicals, and feel better at other times? _____

Did you have these symptoms before becoming pregnant? _____

Describe how you feel.

9. Do any of the chemicals you work with get on your skin? _____ If yes, which ones?

10. Do you eat, drink, smoke, or apply make-up in the work area? _____

11. What kind of ventilation is in your work area?

hood with power exhaust near chemical source?
general (wall fans, roof fans, ceiling vents)?
natural (open windows and doors)?

Do you think the ventilation is effective in reducing your exposure? _____

Is it always turned on when you are using chemicals? _____

Does it usually work well? _____

12. Are there any unusual situations at work, such as equipment breakdowns or spills, that may expose you to any other chemicals or to larger amounts of those you use routinely? _____
Describe them.

13. Do you wear any special clothing, such as gloves or an apron? If so, what?

What is each item of clothing made out of?

Do chemicals leak through the clothing? _____

14. Do you wear a respirator? _____

What kind? Is it a paper mask? _____

hard plastic with cartridges? _____

What kind of cartridges does it have?

When do you wear a respirator?

What are the specific chemicals for which you wear a respirator?

Have you been fit-tested and trained to use your respirator? _____

15. Does your employer give you any instructions and warnings about the use of chemicals? _____
If so, what?

16. Have the air levels of chemicals in your work area been measured? _____

If monitoring has been done, you have a legal right to see the results relevant to your work area (GISO 3204). Do you know the results? _____
What were they?

17. Do you do any other work outside your regular job, or have any hobbies, which include exposure to chemicals? _____ Describe them.