

NAWIC

The National Association of
Women in Construction

Safety & Health Awareness Committee

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Reproductive Health Hazards for Women in Construction

Spring is quickly approaching, a time of thinking about rebirth, and a great time to address reproductive hazards faced by women in the construction industry. The US Department of Labor defines reproductive hazards as substances or agents that may affect reproductive health or the ability of couples to have healthy children. These hazards can cause problems such as infertility, miscarriage, and birth defects. Workers can be exposed to reproductive hazards by breathing them in (inhalation), by contact with skin (dermal) and by swallowing them (ingestion). In addition, a worker can expose his/her family to these hazards by bringing them home from the workplace, for example, on his/her skin, hair, clothes, shoes, tools, or car. It is important to consciously prevent these exposures using workplace engineering controls, proper work practices, and good hygiene. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) recommends the following steps to protect women's reproductive health in the construction workplace:

- Take all required job training before beginning work.
- Perform a job hazard analysis and understand the hazards. Ask your supervisor if there are any potential hazards related to your specific job tasks and what protections are currently in place.
- Review Safety Data Sheets (SDSs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for handling, storage, and disposal of hazardous materials. Follow the recommended control measures in SDSs and SOPs to minimize exposure.
- If your work processes require PPE such as gloves, hearing protection, a respirator, or a lab coat, make sure they still fit, and that you are using them consistently and correctly. Also, remember to check your PPE before using it to make sure it is functioning properly. Remove disposable gloves and discard, followed by proper handwashing techniques.
- Have a conversation with your health care professional if you are concerned about your health, or if you and your partner are pregnant or trying to become pregnant. Tell your health care professional the kind of work you perform and what kinds of hazards are in your workplace (e.g., chemicals, noise, heat, working night shifts, lifting heavy objects, etc.), and ask for best practices and recommendations to protect yourself, your partner, and your unborn child.

You should also know your rights. Some employers find it easier to resolve potential challenges by denying jobs to women, especially pregnant women. This is despite Supreme Court rulings prohibiting employers from continuing this practice. This can lead to discriminatory treatment toward tradeswomen and result in a tradeswoman hiding her pregnancy, possibly endangering herself and/or her unborn child. It can also result in tradeswomen suffering economic hardships due to the lack of job opportunities. Reproductive health hazards are an important but often overlooked issue women face in the construction industry. With focused planning and an eye to your rights, you can protect your reproductive health. You can find more information in this article from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): [Female Repro web.vp:CorelVentura 7.0 \(cdc.gov\)](#).



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