

# WORKING DURING PREGNANCY



THE SOCIETY OF  
OBSTETRICIANS AND  
GYNAECOLOGISTS  
OF CANADA

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**For most women with healthy pregnancies, it is safe to work until just before childbirth.**

Can you work during pregnancy? How long you can work for? The answer depends on your health, the health of your baby and the type of work that you do. Talk to your doctor, nurse or midwife — he or she can help you plan for when you will stop working.

## Is it safe for me to work during pregnancy?

For most women with uncomplicated pregnancies, the type of work they do does not usually pose any health risks for them or their babies. However, if your work is hard on your body, your doctor, nurse or midwife may suggest you make changes until after your pregnancy.

You might also be at risk if you work with certain chemicals, solvents, fumes or radiation. To find out more about this type of hazard, at work and at home, go to [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org). Women planning a pregnancy should be careful and follow all safety guidelines. If you are already pregnant, your care provider may advise you to avoid contact with some of these workplace hazards. Your employer may also have policies in place to protect pregnant women.

## Work activities to discuss with your care provider

Your doctor, nurse or midwife may recommend changes if your work involves the following:

- Stooping or bending over more than ten times each hour
- Climbing a ladder more than three times during an eight-hour shift
- Standing for more than four hours at one time
- Climbing stairs more than three times per shift
- Working more than 40 hours per week
- Shift work
- Lifting more than 23 kg (50 lbs) after the 20th week of pregnancy
- Lifting more than 11 kg (24 lbs) after the 24th week
- Stooping, bending or climbing ladders after the 28th week
- Needing to lift any heavy items after the 30th week
- Needing to stand still for more than 30 minutes of every hour after the 32nd week
- Working with chemicals, solvents, fumes or radiation

**What about Fifth disease?** Some women who work with young children may be at higher risk of being exposed to this common virus which, in very rare cases, could harm your unborn baby. However, there is usually no need for a woman to cease work because of this risk.

## I have an uncomplicated pregnancy. When should I stop working?



A woman who is having a normal, healthy pregnancy is considered 'fit to work' until the start of labour. However, the choice of when to stop working is *yours*, and should be discussed with your health-care provider, who is there to support you in making decisions that are right for you. Many women choose to stop working two to six weeks before their expected delivery dates, although others may need more or less time than that.

## Will I receive maternity benefits when I stop working?

For a woman in Canada with a healthy pregnancy, stopping work before the onset of labour is considered to be a voluntary leave. In this situation, Canada's federal Employment Insurance (EI) program will provide *maternity benefits* for a woman who is within eight weeks of her expected due date (see the next page for information on how many hours you must have worked to be eligible).

This type of voluntary, health-related maternity leave to prepare for delivery is different from a sickness leave, which a health-care provider might advise for a pregnant woman who is experiencing complications that make her unable to continue working as long as she had expected.



## Employment Insurance Benefits

In Canada, federal Employment Insurance (EI) provides temporary financial assistance to Canadians who are sick, pregnant or caring for a newborn or adopted child. In order to qualify for these maternity, parental or sickness benefits, you must have worked 600 hours within the past 52 weeks. For more detailed information on eligibility and benefits, visit [www.servicescanada.gc.ca](http://www.servicescanada.gc.ca).

*Maternity benefits:* The EI program provides maternity benefits of up to 15 weeks to a mother for the birth of a child. These benefits can be collected any time during a period which begins eight weeks before your expected due date and ends 17 weeks after the birth. However, if

you stop work earlier than eight weeks before the due date, you would not receive EI maternity benefits until the eligibility period begins.

*Parental benefits:* In addition to the 15 weeks of maternity benefits, the EI program provides parental benefits to either parent for up to 35 weeks. These benefits can be claimed by either parent, concurrently or consecutively, as long as the total maternity and parental benefits add up to no more than 50 weeks for a pregnancy.

*Sickness benefits:* The EI program provides sickness benefits to individuals who are unable to work because of sickness.

*Other information:* Some employers may also supplement EI benefits so that parents receive up to 95 per cent of their salary while on maternity or parental leave. The province of Quebec is the only province that has a program to provide financial benefits to women with uncomplicated pregnancies whose work or work environment may pose a threat to them or their unborn children, if they cannot be temporarily reassigned by their employers to jobs that are not hazardous.

### What if I have complications in pregnancy?

Pregnant women who experience complications or other illness-related problems during pregnancy may be deemed unable to continue working by their health-care professional. If this is the case for you, you may be eligible to receive *sickness benefits* from the EI program until your health problem resolves or until you qualify for *maternity benefits*.

However, a health-care provider cannot advocate for a sickness leave, which would qualify you for *sickness benefits* through the EI program, without justification. Issues such as discomfort, poor sleep, fatigue, and musculoskeletal pain are unfortunate but are a normal part of a healthy pregnancy.

### How can my health-care provider help me make the right choices?

The role of obstetrical care providers in Canada is to promote and apply best practices in caring for pregnant women, in order to minimize risk and maximize positive outcomes for both mother and infant. Pregnant women often seek input from their caregivers on the topic of maternity leave, and to plan for stopping work before delivery.

### Further resources

- Information about Canada's federal *Employment Insurance* program at [www.servicescanada.gc.ca](http://www.servicescanada.gc.ca)
- The *Motherisk* program of the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto is a recognized leader for information about medications and hazardous substances in pregnancy and breastfeeding. You may talk to the team at Motherisk by calling the toll-free number 1-877-439-2744 or visiting [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org).

### Resources from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada

- The clinical practice guideline *Maternity Leave in Normal Pregnancy*, available at [www.sogc.org](http://www.sogc.org).
- The book *Healthy Beginnings: Giving your baby the best start, from preconception to birth*, available at [www.sogc.org/healthybeginnings](http://www.sogc.org/healthybeginnings)