

Safety Guidelines for Pregnant People in UVM's Laboratories

Introduction

The University of Vermont seeks to minimize the risks of working in its laboratories for all employees and students. Minimizing risks for pregnant people is especially important due to the sensitivity of the fetus to specific chemicals, biological agents and ionizing radiation. All lab workers should know the hazards of the materials with which they work, and it is important to recognize that an individual's susceptibility to those hazards may change due to factors such as pregnancy.

Information about specific hazardous materials may be found in Safety Data Sheets (SDSs), labels, and literature from Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) or from the instructor for the class. All employees, including those who are pregnant, are encouraged to make use of these sources of information. Safe laboratory procedures minimize exposure for all laboratory employees and, if followed faithfully, they also protect the developing fetus.

The federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act prevents UVM from compelling a person to disclose that they are pregnant, and it prevents them from being assigned to different tasks simply because they are pregnant. If a person willingly informs UVM that they are pregnant then additional assessments, precautions, or other accommodations can be implemented. Colleges, departments, and faculty will determine the extent to which a pregnant lab worker or lab student can be excused from lab requirements or the accommodations that can be made.

In all cases, a pregnant person should discuss their laboratory environment with their medical care professional and provide specific information about potential exposures. Additionally pregnant lab workers can:

- Request a hazard assessment with EHS to understand those potential exposures and protective measures that should be utilized;
- Contact the UVM Office of Accessibility Services for information about and assistance with accommodations;
- Request from the Department, a voluntary altered assignment within the lab either through a change in lab duties, reduced time, or a change in location*;
- Request a delay in entry into the academic program requiring the laboratory work*; or
- Continue to work in a laboratory by utilizing the regular safety precautions that have been developed for the laboratory.

* *Please note that requests for voluntary changes might not be able to be honored.*

Chemicals

Safety Data Sheets, container labels and literature provide information about the hazards of specific chemicals as well as allowable exposures to those chemicals. Be aware that most occupational safety and chemical hazard information considers allowable exposures to adults with healthy immune status. Teratogens and fetotoxic chemicals are of especial concern for pregnant workers, though all other hazards should still be considered. Hundreds of chemicals have been identified as having teratogenic effects, a few examples include, but are not limited to lead, ethanol, thalidomide, ethisterone, testosterone, retinoic acid, tetracycline, chemotherapeutic agents and certain ethylene glycol ethers. Contact safety@uvm.edu, www.uvm.edu/safety for more information.

Biological Agents

Some viruses and infectious agents have harmful reproductive effects in pregnant people. Examples include, but are not limited to Cytomegalovirus, Hepatitis B virus, Varicella zoster virus, LCMV, Toxoplasma gondii, and Rubella virus. Information about the toxic effects can be found at <https://www.uvm.edu/safety/biological-safety> or by contacting safety@uvm.edu.

Ionizing Radiation

The first trimester is known to be the most radiosensitive time for a fetus, thus, it is beneficial, but not required, to meet with the RSO as soon as possible to review safety practices and monitoring options. If a pregnant radiation worker decides to declare their pregnancy, they will meet with the radiation safety officer to review radiation safety procedures, the risk to the fetus, and NRC Regulatory Guide 8.13 (pdf).

A pregnant person who does not declare their pregnancy is protected under the regulations for adult radiation workers.

All female radiation workers are given a copy of the NRC Regulatory Guide 8.13 (pdf) as part of the process of becoming a certified radiation handler.

Additional Information

- OSHA's guidance on Reproductive Hazards
<https://www.osha.gov/reproductive-hazards>
- NIOSH The Effects of Workplace Hazards on Female Reproductive Health
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/99-104/pdfs/99-104.pdf>
- NIOSH The Effects of Workplace Hazards on Male Reproductive Health
<https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/21443>
- Chemical Safety information and SDS's
<https://www.uvm.edu/safety/chemical-safety>
- University of Vermont Environmental Health & Safety
<http://www.uvm.edu/safety/>