

Workplace Safety and Women

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC - safer, healthier people.

[Kathy Maddox] Welcome to this CDC women's health podcast about workplace safety and health. I'm your host, Kathy Maddox.

Women make up nearly half the workforce in the United States and face several unique issues, including stress, demanding work schedules, pregnancy, and workplace violence. Dr. Naomi Swanson, with CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, is joining me by phone today to talk about women at work. Welcome, Dr. Swanson.

[Naomi Swanson] Thank you, Kathy.

[Kathy Maddox] Dr. Swanson, tell us about job stress.

[Naomi Swanson] Well, Kathy, no job is immune from stress. Both women and men have to deal with certain types of stressors at work, including having too much to do, too little time to get everything done, conflicting requests from different people, little control over workload or job tasks, and difficult bosses or co-workers. It's important for employers to assess potential causes of stress in the workplace, and to take steps that will lower the risk of stress, based on the particular circumstances of that workplace.

[Kathy Maddox] Why is job stress an important issue for women?

[Naomi Swanson] Women may have additional stressors that affect men to a lesser degree. For example, women often have primary responsibility for children and household chores, so juggling the demands of work and family can be a greater stressor for women. Women are more likely than men to face inequitable treatment on the job because of their gender, such as differential hiring and promotion practices. And some jobs that are done primarily by women, such as nursing or customer service, are more likely to require long or irregular hours and stressful interactions with patients or customers.

[Kathy Maddox] What can we do to manage stress?

[Naomi Swanson] There are several things you can do to deal with stress. One is to talk with your supervisor about how stressful aspects of your job can be changed. It's important for your employer to recognize and address factors for stress in the workplace. Getting rid of the things causing stress is the best way to lower stress levels. Another strategy is to try stress management techniques, such as progressive relaxation. And it's also important to get regular sleep.

[Kathy Maddox] How can work schedules affect health?

[Naomi Swanson] Demanding work schedules, like shift work, working 12 or more hours a day, mandatory overtime, on-call schedules, and inflexible work schedules can affect health.

Shift work and long work hours, in particular, are associated with health and safety risks. When you work long hours, or at unusual times, it can be difficult to interact with family and maintain other social contacts. This can lead to physiological responses associated with stress. Shift work may require you to sleep during the day, and long work hours may reduce the time available for sleep. Both of these can lead to disturbed sleep and incomplete recovery from work. The resulting lack of sleep may negatively affect nervous, cardiovascular, reproductive, metabolic, and immune functioning, as well as lead to accidents and injuries. Long work hours may also increase the amount of time you're exposed to workplace hazards and may reduce time available for exercise or nutritious meals. Added job stress can increase smoking and caffeine use.

[Kathy Maddox] So what can women do to cope with demanding work schedules?

[Naomi Swanson] Strategies should include improving your sleep routine, getting regular exercise, eating nutritious foods, and getting cooperation and understanding from family and friends as you juggle work and other responsibilities. You can also talk to your supervisor about redesigning your work schedule and changing the way your workload is distributed so that more demanding tasks are scheduled when you are less likely to be fatigued. Employers should also improve communication to increase supervisor and co-worker support and institute programs to improve worker awareness.

[Kathy Maddox] What about pregnancy? Are there things in the workplace women need to be aware of if they're pregnant or are planning to become pregnant?

[Naomi Swanson] When women think about having children, many don't think about their job and how it may affect their pregnancy, or even their ability to get pregnant. Chemicals, radiation, even shift work, are things that not only can make it harder to become pregnant, but also can cause a woman to miscarry.

[Kathy Maddox] So what can women do to avoid problems in pregnancy?

[Naomi Swanson] With all there is to worry about when having a baby, there are things a woman can do to help ensure her job does not affect her family. First, she can talk to her doctor or nurse, even before becoming pregnant. If she's worried about something in her work environment, her doctor may be able to advise her about what's okay and what things she should avoid. Before she sees her doctor, she should write down the names of all the chemicals and other hazards she works with and how often she uses them in her job. This information will help her doctor determine if things she works with now may affect pregnancy later. Another thing a woman can do is to follow guidelines at work about equipment or clothing she should wear to protect her from chemicals and other hazards. She should also keep in mind that a man's ability to father a child may be affected by his job, so she should think about her partner's workplace as well.

[Kathy Maddox] Is violence an issue for women at work?

[Naomi Swanson] Violence is the second leading cause of death and is a major source of physical and psychological injury committed against women in the workplace. However, both

men and women can be targeted for aggression at work. Bullying and rudeness by co-workers or supervisors is the most common form of aggression.

[Kathy Maddox] What about domestic violence? Does that affect women in the workplace?

[Naomi Swanson] Domestic violence can affect workers in many ways. The productivity of the victim often goes down, creating added stress for the victim and her co-workers. Perpetrators use various methods to harm their victims at work, such as making harassing phone calls, emails, and text-messages; forcing the victim to miss work; and showing up at the victim's place of work. What we hear about in the news is the worst case scenario, where the perpetrator takes a firearm into the workplace and shoots the victim and her co-workers.

[Kathy Maddox] What can women do to lower their chances for physical and psychological violence in the workplace?

[Naomi Swanson] In the case of domestic violence, the victim should provide security with a copy of any current restraining order as well as a recent picture of the person that's subject to the order. They should also provide this information to their supervisor; ask the supervisor for some flexibility in work hours to accommodate getting their affairs in order, court dates, and childcare; and seek assistance through the employee assistance program. In general, everyone needs to be familiar with the risks in their workplace and increase their awareness of workplace violence prevention policies and procedures.

[Kathy Maddox] Thank you, Dr. Swanson, for explaining the health and safety issues women face in the workplace and how to manage them. For more information on women's health and safety issues at work, please visit www.cdc.gov/niosh and type women in the search box.

For more information on women's health, visit www.cdc.gov/women. For CDC, I'm Kathy Maddox.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO 24-7.