

# Pregnancy and fertility at work

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# Introduction

Here, we'll give an overview of how managers can be a vital source of support for pregnant employees and new parents in the workplace. We also look at supporting those who might be experiencing pregnancy or fertility problems.



Click the home icon at any point in this guide to return to this page.



Supporting people during pregnancy

Problems with pregnancy

Infertility



## Supporting a team member during their pregnancy

Employees don't legally need to tell their employer that they are pregnant until 15 weeks before their baby is due.<sup>1,2</sup> But many choose to do so earlier than that, often after 12 weeks of pregnancy when the risk of miscarriage decreases.<sup>1</sup>

After the initial congratulations, line managers can offer practical support and see whether any changes at work would help. Bear in mind that if a member of your team is pregnant they should ideally:<sup>3</sup>

- take frequent breaks
- not work very long hours
- wear loose, comfortable clothes
- be able to put their feet up if they're swollen or uncomfortable – workplaces can provide foot rests to help with this
- have access to a fridge so they can bring food in from home, to maintain a healthy diet
- have help with lifting anything heavy
- be in a well-ventilated environment to prevent overheating and fainting.

Your organisation will have certain legal obligations to a pregnant employee.<sup>3</sup> These include making reasonable adjustments to allow them to continue working, and providing suitable rest facilities in the workplace where they can lie down if needed.<sup>3</sup> Employees have the right to take paid time off for antenatal appointments.

At the same time as offering support, don't make assumptions that pregnant people need help in still being able to do their job. Research has suggested that doing so can backfire, impact someone's confidence, and make it more likely they will leave their job.<sup>4</sup> Have an open dialogue with them about what their needs are and how you can support them.<sup>5</sup>

# Problems with pregnancy

Some pregnancies will have complications. This can include a range of conditions, such as diabetes during pregnancy (gestational diabetes) and pelvic pain.<sup>6,7</sup> Employees may need support to be able to continue working and also may need time off for hospital appointments.

Sadly, some people will lose their baby before, during, or shortly after birth.<sup>8</sup>

This can naturally be devastating for your team member. They and their partner, if they have one, are likely to need time off work, flexibility, and a lot of understanding from their employer and colleagues.<sup>9,10</sup> A lot of people will seek support from friends and family, but other sources of support include charities such as Sands or Tommy's, health professionals, and religious organisations.<sup>10</sup>



# Infertility

Around one in every seven couples will have problems conceiving despite trying for a year or more.<sup>11</sup>

There are lots of different possible reasons for this, which can relate to one or both partners.<sup>11</sup> In around 30 to 40 percent of cases the cause of infertility simply isn't known.<sup>11</sup>

Some people who have fertility problems choose to try in vitro fertilisation (IVF). This treatment is also an option for same-sex couples.<sup>12</sup> IVF involves taking medication to encourage the ovaries to produce more eggs.<sup>12</sup> The eggs are then fertilised outside of the body with sperm to create an embryo, which is then placed into the womb to hopefully lead to pregnancy.<sup>13</sup> The whole process can take between one and two months, with the chances of success varying depending on a number of factors.<sup>13</sup>

As with any personal issue, a colleague may choose not to disclose to anyone at work that they're going through IVF. But if you are their line manager and they do wish to discuss it with you, you can be sensitive and supportive by allowing them to work as flexibly as possible during this time.

There is no statutory right to time off during IVF. However, a combination of paid, unpaid and annual leave (as well as time off for appointments in line with your organisational policy) can really make a difference.<sup>14</sup> It might be a good time to remind your colleagues of any emotional support services that your company provides, such as an employee assistance programme (EAP).

## Find out more

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has more details about legal responsibilities for employers during pregnancy on its website, [equalityhumanrights.com](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com) as well as a helpful conversation guide for managers.

## Around 1 in 250 pregnancies ended in stillbirth in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

The stillbirth and neonatal charity, Sands, [sands.org.uk](https://www.sands.org.uk) offers training for organisations for creating a supportive environment in the workplace as well as toolkits. Pregnancy charity Tommy's, [tommys.org](https://www.tommys.org), also provides workplace training for supporting pregnancy at work.

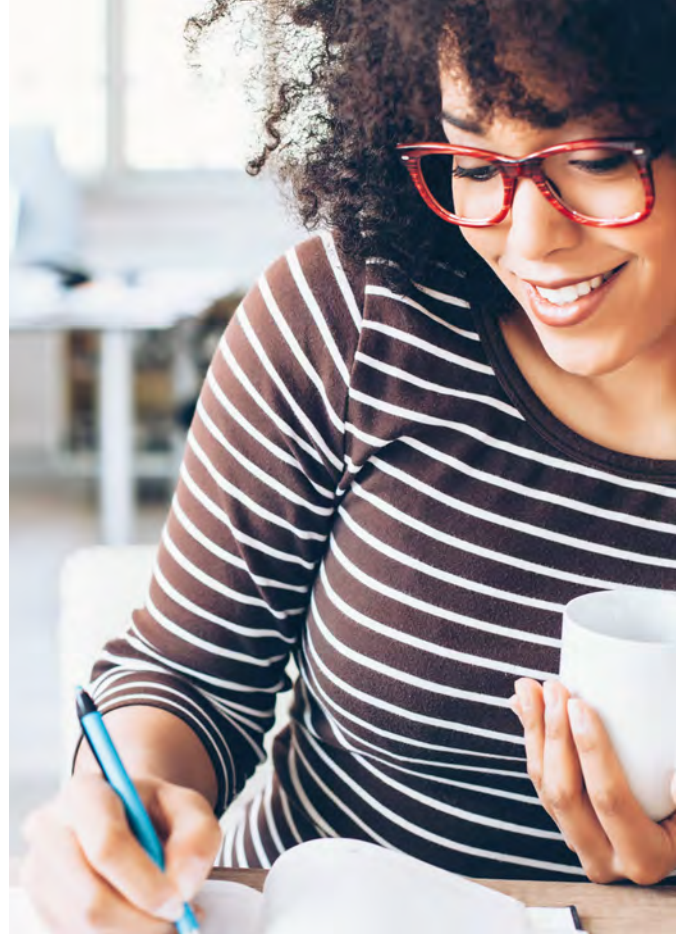
## Fertility Network UK

The charity Fertility Network UK offers guidance and training for employers. A webinar and factsheet are accessible through its website, [fertilitynetworkuk.org](https://www.fertilitynetworkuk.org)

# Resources

## Sources

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