

Safe Pregnancy for Laboratory Workers

The Chemistry Department seeks to minimize the risks of working in its laboratories for all employees and students, especially for pregnant women because of the known sensitivity of the fetus to specific chemicals, in particular teratogens. All laboratory workers are expected to know the hazards of chemicals they are using, including the pregnant woman. Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) are essential, but may not provide a complete set of recommendations. Additional protective equipment may be available, but alternatives to laboratory work such as spectroscopic or computational studies, library work, writing, or seminar preparation may be requested by the pregnant laboratory worker. Each woman's situation will be different, so the Department can be creative and flexible. We encourage a pregnant woman to consider those accommodations that she might request for her well being, and for the well being of her fetus.

While there are many ways the Department can assist a woman who is pregnant, we cannot activate those accommodations without her involvement. The federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act prevents the Department from compelling a woman to disclose that she is pregnant, and it prevents us from assigning her to different tasks simply because she is pregnant. The University complies with the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. If a woman willingly informs us that she is pregnant and asks for reasonable accommodations, then we can help.

We encourage a pregnant graduate student who has questions to consult with her Research Director and the Graduate Program Director as soon as her pregnancy has been confirmed. Strictly confidential discussions will cover topics such as extensions to programmatic deadlines, changes in degree progress expectations, and assistantship assignments. A student on GRA or GTA may request alternative assignments. Generally, academic deadlines and eligibility for departmental assistantship support can be extended by up to one year for the new parent. To ensure fulfillment of the agreements reached, the Graduate Program Director will draft a written summary of the accommodations. Upon approval by the student, the plan will be shared with the student's Research Director, with a copy kept in the student's record.

Maternity/Paternity Leave for New Parents

Graduate Students. An expectant graduate student desiring a paid-leave accommodation, whether male or female, may consult with their Research Director and with the Graduate Program Director. The Assistant Chair of the Department will apply to the Graduate School for a Work-Life Grant that usually provides 6-weeks of support for a temporary replacement, either GTA or GRA, on behalf of a pregnant mother or new parent around the time of childbirth or adoption. The graduate student must make the request for assistance in writing to the Assistant Chair for this support, ideally 6 months prior to childbirth or adoption. The individual hired as a temporary replacement for a GTA must be fully qualified and approved by the Graduate Program Director and the Assistant Chair. Normally, the leave will begin at childbirth, but it may begin earlier if there are complications with the pregnancy or adoption. Some of the accommodation time may be taken on a part-time basis, for example 4 weeks of full-time, and 4 weeks of half-time leave.

Other Laboratory Workers. An expectant parent, post-doctoral associate or other laboratory staff, who has questions about work duties is encouraged to consult with the Research Director, the Personnel Officer, the Assistant Chair, and Human Resources as soon as pregnancy has been confirmed. Maternity or paternity leave may be accommodated by a combination of sick leave, personal leave, and short-term disability (VSDP handbook: <http://www.hr.vt.edu/leave/files/vsdp.pdf>) in consultation with the Personnel Officer in the Department of Chemistry, and with Human Resources.

Related Accommodations. Information regarding local childcare options may be found at www.hokiewellness.vt.edu/worklife/childcare. During the leave period, the Department will make a good-faith effort to provide reasonable accommodations so that the graduate student's or laboratory

staff's health insurance does not lapse, and so that they can maintain their visa status through pregnancy and maternity. Reasonable efforts will be made to provide access to a private, clean lactation room for new mothers returning to work. Lactation rooms currently available, both on the main campus and at the Corporate Research Center, are listed on the Human Resources Work-Life web site under lactation (<http://www.hokiewellness.hr.vt.edu/worklife/lactation/>). The use of these rooms requires a simple registration form to be completed by the mother. The closest lactation room to the Department of Chemistry is on the 3rd floor of Burruss Hall.