Reproductive health

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REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Congratulations on your pregnancy (or your intention to be pregnant)!

AFA-CWA offers a free Reproductive Health Information Packet to members that includes information on the various hazards in your working environment that may impact your fertility, the health of your baby, or both. We encourage you to review it and take it to your doctor, since many doctors are unaware of this information. In some cases, it may be possible or necessary to stop flying during your pregnancy. In others, it may be not be possible to stop flying during your pregnancy (or when trying to conceive), but you may be able to bid for flights within fewer time zones at lower latitudes, and you can ensure that you do not fly during solar storms. Finally, another option may be to drop trips during your first trimester and for the latter part of your third trimester. These are complex decisions with obvious financial implications, but we hope that the information provided may help you and your doctor agree on the best course of action that enables you to pay the bills and carry a healthy baby to term.

To request a copy of our complete reproductive health information packet (updated Apr 2010), email or call 206-932-6237. Some of the references are also provided on this webpage and there is additional information on our radiation webpage.

See also Benefits you may be eligible for during pregnancy (and after baby is born) - Air Safety, Health, & Security Department, Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (Apr 2016)

Are flight attendants at higher risk of miscarriage because of their job? Under certain conditions (physical demands, radiation exposure), researchers at the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) say yes. More information about the research findings posted here, and some discussion on the NIOSH blog here. Additional information on NIOSH air crew safety and health research is posted here.

Great news: “The Invisible Passenger” (revised edition) has been released. It is a comprehensive, readable, introduction to the hazards of in-flight radiation. Click here to purchase. AFA members are offered a 20% discount on the $19.95 cover price. To receive the discount go to the order form and look for the “Do you have any special instructions” block. Enter the text “AMPFA 20% discount.” The online invoice will show a full price charge but your credit card will be charged the discount price when the book ships.

Fortunately, smoking is no longer permitted on aircraft, but this research found that children exposed to the combination of tobacco smoke early in life (including in utero) and even low levels of lead had a much greater risk of developing Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
than children exposed to either one or none of those toxins. Sources of lead include old paint, old water pipes, and air pollution. The question of whether this increased risk of ADHD holds true for smoking and toxins other than lead (and there are many in the aircraft cabin) needs to be investigated. Also, it’s an important information about the risk of smoking during pregnancy and around small children. Thank you to Arlene Blum, PhD for bringing this information to our attention.

List of occupational hazards and sample of supporting information (again, for complete information packet, contact us):

**Galactic and solar radiation:** In-flight, you are exposed to elevated levels of solar and galactic radiation relative to ground-based workers. Exposure is a function of altitude, latitude, duration, and solar activity, with the highest exposures being on high altitude, high latitude, long haul flights, especially if a “solar particle event” (or “solar storm”) is underway. The FAA has acknowledged that a female crewmember can exceed the recommended monthly radiation dose during pregnancy if flying high altitude, high latitude flights, even with no solar particle events, and that the mother’s belly offers no shielding to the baby (FAA, 2000). Conversely, flying a reduced number of domestic flights with no solar particle events is unlikely to exceed recommended radiation exposure limits. Generally, exposure to elevated levels of radiation during pregnancy (or prior to conception for both the father and mother) is considered to increase the risk of miscarriage, birth defects, and childhood cancer (Barish, 2004). Most of the radiation you are exposed to in-flight is galactic (i.e., comes from other stars) but some comes from our sun (solar). The contribution from our sun is considered to be of health significance during a “solar particle event” rated S2 or higher which occur infrequently but are important to know about. Read the AFA bulletin, below, to learn how to prevent exposure during solar storms.

- **Are you flying through a solar particle event? (and why to avoid doing so, especially when pregnant)** Air Safety, Health, & Security Department, Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (April 2016)

  Check this website before going to the airport. If the green line is above "10 to the zero" on the left side of the graph, it is recommended that pregnant women postpone travel. To help you interpret the graph that you see on your computer screen, here is an example of a graph with no Solar Particle Event (SPE) and here is one with a SPE of health significance. The NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center will also notify you of these solar events for free by email. This is especially important information if you are pregnant. Register as a user, then click on "aviation", "subscribe", "solar radiation events", and then check the following five boxes: (1) WARNING: proton event 10 MeV > 10 PFU expected; (2) ALERT: proton event 10 MeV, exceeded 100 PFU; (3) ALERT: proton event 10 MeV, exceeded 1,000 PFU; (4) ALERT: proton event 10 MeV, exceeded 10,000 PFU; and (5) ALERT: proton event 10 MeV, exceeded 100,000 PFU.

- **Cosmic and solar radiation: facts for flight attendants** Air Safety, Health, & Security Department, Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO (Last updated Apr 2010)

- **Transport Canada updates its recommended radiation protections** Issued as Commercial & Business Aviation Advisory Circular No. 0183R, Apr 28, 2006. see Section 11 for pregnancy protections (first published in 2001)

- **Galactic cosmic radiation exposure of pregnant aircrew members II** US
Elevated physical activity, physical fatigue, long work hours: These factors have been associated with reduced fertility, low birth weight babies, and increased risk of miscarriage.

- **Federal Aviation Regulation 121.467** describes maximum scheduled duty and minimum scheduled rest requirements, including the fact that an airline can schedule a flight attendant to work a 14 hours of continuous duty, with permission to extend the flight duty day without rest beyond 14 hours if there are delays outside the control of the carrier, such as weather and air traffic control. Duty and rest requirements may vary between airlines.

- Examples of flight attendant job descriptions at a major carrier and regional carrier. Duties include pushing a service cart that can weigh more than 250 pounds up an incline, bending, pushing, pulling, squatting, being on your feet for hours at a time, and assisting passengers in stowing and retrieving carry on bags.

Night shift/jet lag: These factors have been associated with reduced fertility and increased risk of miscarriage.

Miscellaneous: Additional research papers have reported an increased risk of miscarriage and menstrual disorders among active flight attendants (suggesting a work-related connection), but the specific causes were not tested.