

Tools for Success - Chapter 4: If You've Ever Carried Groceries or Children, You Can Do It:

Meeting the Physical Challenges

Women are more than capable of doing heavy work in the trades. Generally, you'll be expected to be able to lift 70 pounds. According to one tradeswoman, any woman who's ever carried children or groceries can carry 70 pounds (and we'd love to meet a woman who's never carried children or groceries). Possible, however, does not mean comfortable, and for many women, the constant physical activity and repetitive lifting will be difficult until their bodies adjust to these new demands. Be patient with your body's learning curve and:

Work on your physical conditioning

Join a gym, or work out on your own or with other women in the trades. Women usually need to work on upper-body strength, but overall conditioning is important too.

Expect to be tested.

Many tradeswomen report that they are asked to do what men wouldn't do by themselves. Some suggest that you try, or at least pretend to try, the jobs you're asked to do. "Conduct yourself as if you are being spied on and give them a good show."

Know your limits

Don't injure yourself to prove that you can do the work. If you've tried (or pretended to try) to lift something and you think you'll hurt yourself, ask for help.

Learn to "work smart" and leverage.

Talk to other tradeswomen about techniques for handling tools and equipment. Watch how other workers are doing jobs to find the most efficient method.

If you're injured, give yourself enough time to recover.

Tradeswomen say they are sometimes pressured to go back to heavy work before they've recovered completely from an injury. Remember that it's better to wait a little longer and recover completely than to injure yourself again right away.

Worker's Compensation

If you are injured on the job or if you have a job-related disease, you're eligible for Workers' Compensation. Benefits include first aid, emergency care, and medical and hospital services. If you're unable to work for more than three days, you're entitled to Total Temporary Disability, compensation for the time lost from work. For more serious injury or illness, you are entitled to long-term benefits, including vocational rehabilitation. For a state by state guide to filing for worker's compensation, visit: <http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/regs/compliance/wc.htm>

For injuries or job-related illness, follow these steps carefully:

1) Notify your supervisor. It is best to notify your supervisor orally; if your company requires you to notify them in writing, keep a copy of your notice. Be sure that your

notice stresses that the injury or illness is job-related. Although you have 45 days under Worker's Compensation Law to give notice, it's best to do it immediately.

2) See medical attention. Your employer must pay for the doctor you choose. Be sure that the doctor's notes about your case mention the work connection.

3) Keep good records. Include the time, date, and place of the accident, if equipment was involved, and the names and addresses of any witnesses.

4) Unless your case is very simple and you are absolutely sure that your employer will pay all health costs and loss of work benefits, file a claim with the Industrial Commission of your state.

Never agree to settle your case until you talk with a union representative or a lawyer who knows Worker's Compensation benefits well. Worker's Compensation is complicated. Unless your case is a very simple one, you'll probably need assistance to obtain the benefits you're entitled to.

Additional resources:

Handbook of Workers Compensation and Occupational Diseases -
www.iwcc.il.gov/handbook020106.pdf

State Workers' Compensation Officials:

<http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/regs/compliance/wc.htm>

Clothes and Safety Equipment

Clothing and equipment that doesn't fit well aren't safe. If your employer provides gloves, rubber boots, hard hats, welding helmets, dust masks, goggles, safety belts and other equipment, make sure they fit. Don't work with clothes or equipment that doesn't fit, they will not protect you and can actually endanger you. Ask your employer for proper equipment and if they won't provide clothes and equipment that fit you, ask your union to help you get the equipment that does.

Dangerous Working Conditions

You will find dangerous working conditions from time to time as you work in the trades and, if you see something, you should say something. If your employer will not correct these conditions when you point them out, you can notify to your union, asking for their assistance in getting conditions corrected. You can also anonymously file a safety violation notice to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of the U.S. Department of Labor, which will inspect your workplace and can require your employer to correct unsafe conditions - <https://www.osha.gov/as/opa/worker/complain.html>. Finally, if you are very concerned about your safety, you can refuse to perform the work you find dangerous, stating that you will do it when the specific hazards you mention have been corrected. If you are fired for doing this, you can contact your union or OSHA.

If you're injured or if you have an illness related to your work, you should report it your employer, and encourage other workers to do the same thing. Many workers hesitate to do

this because they are afraid of losing their jobs. However, compensation claims put pressure on employers to make the workplace safer for all workers. Unfortunately, as a woman you may encounter additional safety problems. Tradeswomen say that co-workers and supervisors sometimes put them in dangerous situations. They also say that they are sometimes chosen over men for dangerous assignments, or not given proper equipment when others are, or assigned to work alone on a job which normally requires two people.

If you think you are being treated differently from other workers in matters safety, or if a co-worker or supervisor is endangering you, you need to take these steps:

- *Write down exactly what is happening, including the date, your assignment, other workers' assignments and any conversations related to the events.*
- *Report your complaint to your supervisor. If your supervisor is aware of the problem and not doing anything about it, or is causing the problem, speak to your supervisor's boss (the owner, or general contractor).*
- *Report the problem to your union steward as well.*

Problems with Hygiene

Although courts have ruled against employers that do not provide sanitary toilet facilities, construction worksites are often hygiene (health) hazards for women. Most have portable toilets used by both men and women. At some sites these toilets are very dirty. At other sites toilets are far away, or there are not toilets at all. There are almost never sinks for washing hands. This is a very sensitive topic for tradeswomen with many different views on what is tolerable and how and when to make complaint.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with hygiene problems:

- *Request a toilet (with a key) for women only – tradeswomen caution that this is very often denied and you should be prepared to find an alternative.*
- *Use the facilities of buildings nearby*
- *If there is no toilet on site, ask for time to get to the closest facility.*
- *Come prepared: bring your own toilet paper, zip lock baggies for feminine products, disinfectant wipes, or hand sanitizer as a precaution*
- *For more information, visit:*
<https://www.osha.gov/doc/acsh/haswicformal.html#sanitaryfacilities>

Reproductive Health

In your work in the trades you may encounter working conditions that are hazardous to your reproductive health, conditions that may cause miscarriages, unhealthy babies and damage to your reproductive system. In the past some hazardous workplaces refused to hire women of childbearing age; this discrimination is now illegal as a result of a 1991 Supreme Court decision. The decision, however, did not solve the problem of sites that are hazardous for both men and women.

If you think that there are reproductive health hazards in your workplace, get as much information as you can about these hazards, including how they can be eliminated or controlled. If you are pregnant, or if you are considering becoming pregnant, you should get this information as quickly as possible. Then, working with your co-workers or with your union, prove to your employer that your workplace is hazardous.

For more information, visit <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/reproductivehazards/index.html>

Pregnancy & Breastfeeding

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination because of pregnancy. An employer cannot refuse to hire you or force you to go on leave because you are pregnant. An employer must treat your pregnancy as he or she would treat any other disability. In addition, under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, women who have worked at least 25 hours a week for the previous 12 months and who are employed by companies with 50 or more employees are entitled to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for childbirth or adoption. Many employers have had no experience with pregnant tradeswomen and no clear policies about handling their needs. If you are the first pregnant tradeswoman to work for your employer, you may have the opportunity to suggest good policies.

If you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant, get the following information before you tell your employer. *Don't tell your co-workers until you tell your employer; news travels very fast in the trades!*

- 1) What are the current policies on pregnancy? What has happened with any other pregnant tradeswomen?*
- 2) What hazards to your pregnancy are there on your job, and how can you reduce or eliminate them (chemicals, heavy lifting, etc.)?*
- 3) Will you want alternate (light) duty, is it possible to get it? Will your pay rate change?*
- 4) If you are planning to breastfeed, are you able to do so on the job or express milk during a break? For a state by state guide on pregnancy and breastfeeding - <http://www.dol.gov/wb/maps>*

You and your doctor or midwife will decide what is most healthy for you and your baby. You may have to educate your doctor about your work, including what physical activity is required and whether there are hazardous conditions on your job.

If you need to make changes on your job, your medical professional should request them specifically. Examples of specific requests are no exposure to hazardous chemicals and no repetitive heavy lifting.

If your employer will not grant you alternate duty (and will do so for other disabilities), if your employer fires you or lays you off because of your pregnancy, or if he or she discriminates against you in any way because of your pregnancy, you should consult with a tradeswomen's organization, with a lawyer and with your union.

Additional resources:

<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/pregnancy.cfm>

<http://womenemployed.org/sites/default/files/resources/YourRightsWhenYouArePregnant2012.pdf>

<http://www.dol.gov/wb/maps>