

Department of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering Statement on Pregnant Students Taking Laboratory Courses

Safety has always been the paramount concern of everyone in the Department and this is especially true for safety in lab courses. This statement focuses on students who are pregnant.

All students taking chemistry laboratory courses are required to read and understand the Department's "Laboratory Safety Rules, Practice and Agreement" before commencing lab work and sign the safety agreement. All students are required to wear eye protection and lab coats; for specific experiment, all students wear lab gloves and, in all cases, a student may request and don lab gloves whenever he/she wishes. Material Safety Data Sheets and related safety information are available for all chemicals being used during the lab courses and a full set of MSDS's are available in the Chemistry Office. The safety precautions in place are to be followed by all students and, when enacted, are regarded as sufficient to minimize health and safety risks for everyone participating in lab courses.

All faculty teaching laboratory classes must inquire about special circumstances that affect students in the lab – particularly medical conditions. If a student does not reveal a relevant medical condition, particularly pregnancy, the instructor cannot properly advise or accommodate that student and the student must assume any untoward risk in participating in the laboratory course.

No student who is eligible can be turned away from a lab class because of a medical problem. Title IX states: "According to the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education, Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on sex, requires three things from institutions receiving any amount of federal money. First, a school cannot treat a woman worse than normal students because she is pregnant, meaning a pregnant student cannot be excluded from any program or activity based on her condition. The second requirement is that schools must accommodate pregnancy as though it were a temporary disability, which means that pregnant women are entitled to the same insurance benefits, leave policies or modified course requirements that temporarily disabled students are entitled to. The last requirement - and this is the big one - is that schools are required to allow a pregnant student to take temporary leave, and when she returns, she must be reinstated to her prior status, regardless of whether the school allows temporary leave for other conditions. The length of a pregnant woman's leave is to be determined by her doctor."

We cannot insure that a pregnant student will not be exposed to chemicals that might be unhealthy for her or her fetus. **NO LIST OF CHEMICALS IS COMPLETE.** In addition, we cannot know the level of exposure, the length of exposure or the number of encounters that might occur with any chemical during a semester.

By maintaining the safety rules, we expect that all students, including a pregnant student, should be able to carry out lab procedures safely. **However, it is the Department's professional advice that pregnant students should be advised NOT to take a lab course unless she is willing to understand and assume the risks.** She should certainly be seeking and following proper medical advice from her physician.

The following are statements from other universities on this issue:

From Purdue University: Pregnant students in undergraduate chemistry labs -- As regards air quality as well as all other laboratory hygiene and protective safety measures, the teaching labs are as good or better than any workplace -- i.e. they are as good as or better than OSHA requires for employees' work environments even though students in teaching labs are not employees and OSHA regulations do not apply to student safety.

However, for most chemicals, very little is known about how a developing fetus will be affected by exposure of its mother to small quantities of the chemical -- air exposure, skin exposure, ingestion (for example a person touching his/her lips after having touched a surface that contained invisible traces of chemical).

Medical doctors often write recommendations or statements for pregnant students, to the effect that the student may take part in the laboratory exercises "if work with volatile and toxic substances is performed in a fume hood, and standard safety and personal protective equipment are used, so that the student not at risk for coming into contact with possibly injurious substances." This is bogus; this is a CYA phrase. The lab is full of students wielding numerous possibly injurious substances, and there is no way that the University can guaranteed that the student is not at risk.

Pregnant lab students who do not wish to risk any possibility of exposure to chemicals in the lab are encouraged to consider withdrawing or taking an incomplete, because the only way to come anywhere close to avoiding that risk is to not be in the lab.

On the other hand, many students recognize that there is no such risk-free environment anywhere, and that the world as a whole, e.g. food additives, hair dye, air pollution.... offers many risks for contact with possibly harmful substances whose effects on the fetus are not known. Pregnant students are encouraged to continue in the lab, focusing on excellent lab hygiene and safety practices, if they are comfortable with the idea that the risk is minimal and acceptable and that standard PPE and safety practices, properly employed, will afford adequate protection.

From Idaho University

If you are pregnant and you want to take the lab, please obtain a written letter from your doctor. We do not know the effect of some of the chemicals that are used in the labs on the fetus or the baby. However, we strongly advise you to take the lab another time when you are not pregnant.

From Texas A&M

Pregnancy introduces an entirely new set of variables in considerations of hazards. Some chemicals that generate no adverse effects in adults can be highly teratogenic (cause abnormalities in embryo or fetus). Although, we will not be working with compounds known to be highly teratogenic, it is considered prudent for pregnant women to limit exposure to all potentially teratogenic chemicals (alcohol, coffee, etc.). It is not known what level of exposure to many chemicals might affect your unborn child. You should assume that these chemicals can

represent a real threat to your unborn child. We consider that exposure of an unborn fetus to an avoidable hazard is unacceptable. If this subject applies to you, we strongly suggest that you seek counsel from your personal physician. Although we cannot prevent any individual from taking this course, we recommend that women who are pregnant should drop this course and take it at a later date. This situation should be one in which your Dean would allow dropping the course with a NG, rather than requiring use of a Q drop.

From Southern Connecticut State University: Health Issues Related to Pregnancy

If a student is pregnant or becomes pregnant and does not inform the instructor, SCSU takes no responsibility for the adverse effects that the chemicals may have on the child or mother. If a student is pregnant and wishes to continue with the lab they must bring the manual to their obstetrician and have a signed letter acknowledging they are allowed to complete the lab experiments. Labs will not be revised under any circumstances to accommodate a pregnant student because the department in general feels that the student should withdraw in this situation. If a student produces the required letter from a doctor, they can complete the experiments at their own risk.

Pregnant students need to be advised that if they chose to enroll in a chemistry laboratory class at UNH, they must participate fully as any other student. They may not take the course in a virtual mode or by watching others. A laboratory course involves full engagement in learning techniques and handling chemicals safely. Students need to be advised that choosing not to take a laboratory course may affect their course of study as such courses may be pre-requisites for other classes.