

New study finds majority of pregnant women require an average of two months sick leave from work

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Three quarters of pregnant women take sick leave from work but employers can help reduce this through flexible work adjustments, suggests a new study published today (7 November) in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*.

The study looked at [women](#) scheduled to give birth, at the Akershus University Hospital in Norway over an 18 month period and the prevalence of, reasons for and factors associated with sick leave during their pregnancies.

Researchers gathered information via a questionnaire conducted at week 17 and week 32 from a total of 2,918 women, of which 2,197 (or just over 75%) received sick leave at some point during their pregnancy.

The study found that women took an average of eight weeks sick leave, ranging from one to 40 weeks, the majority needed between four to 16 weeks. The factors associated with sick leave varied according to trimester of pregnancy with more women requiring time off as their pregnancies progressed. By week 32, 63% of the women were taking sick leave.

Overall 35% of women sited fatigue and [sleep problems](#) as the main reason for taking sick leave, followed closely by pelvic girdle pain (pain caused by limited mobility and functioning of the [pelvis joints](#)) and

[nausea](#) or [vomiting](#), with 32% and 23% of women suffering these symptoms respectively.

While very few women (2.1%) cited anxiety or depression as a reason for their sick leave, they recorded the longest average of sick leave taken at 20 weeks.

The study also looked at work adjustments for [pregnant women](#) and found 60% of the 2,197 women reported having adjustments made to their working situation. On average these women reported taking seven days less sick leave than those who went without job adjustments.

Dr Signe Dorheim, Division of Psychiatry, Stavanger University Hospital, Norway and co-author of the paper said:

"We found that a large number of pregnant women take time off work as sick leave. The factors associated with sick leave varied according to the trimester of pregnancy but some of these factors are not necessarily caused by pregnancy alone.

"While past medical history and socioeconomic conditions can influence the occurrence and length of time taken off as sick leave, women's working situations during pregnancy were significant contributors to our findings.

"Women who suffer from work-related fatigue, such as insomnia, are likely to require more time off, especially during late pregnancy.

"Further research is needed to look at how treatment of certain conditions and work adjustments can lead to less time being taken off work and ultimately a better quality of life for pregnant women."

John Thorp, *BJOG* Deputy-Editor-in-Chief added:

"This study was conducted in Norway, where sick leave entitlements allow workers to receive very good compensation for time taken due to illness, so this may impact the findings.

"However, the factors that affect pregnant women in the workplace are universal and this study shows a clear link between working conditions and the duration of [sick leave](#), which highlights the potential benefits for employers to have a support system in place. "Pregnancy is a normal physiological state, however, it can affect women in different ways. If a woman is concerned she should talk to her employer, GP or midwife for support."

More information: Signe K. Dorheim, Bjorn Bjorvatn, Malin Eberhard-Gran. Sick leave during pregnancy: a longitudinal study of rate and risk factors in a Norwegian population. BJOG 2012; 10.1111/1471-0528.12035

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