

BUSINESS

AT&T would transfer pregnant workers

Reassignments offered at semiconductor plants

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Concerned over possible high miscarriage rates among female semiconductor workers, American Telephone & Telegraph Co. said yesterday that as a precaution it was offering to transfer all its pregnant computer chip workers to other jobs within the company.

In addition, AT&T officials said the company was undertaking a health survey of 4,000 female production-line workers in five semiconductor plants it operates nationwide to see if there is evidence of elevated miscarriage rates at those facilities.

"We've decided it would be better to be safe than sorry," AT&T spokeswoman Lydia Whitefield said of the move.

The action by the communications giant comes in response to a recent study commissioned by Digital Equipment Corp. of Maynard which found significantly higher rates of miscarriages among production-line

workers at its Hudson semiconductor plant.

Among one group of female production workers, the Digital study found that 39 percent of pregnancies ended in miscarriages, as compared with an expected rate of between 10 and 20 percent.

Digital has passed the results of the study — the first of its kind in the computer industry — along to semiconductor manufacturers nationwide.

Whitefield said AT&T received a summary of the study about two weeks ago, and within a matter of days passed along the findings to all its production-line workers, as did Digital.

"We offered all the pregnant women working in the affected areas transfers," she said. So far, she added, only 15 pregnant production workers in AT&T and Bell Laboratories plants have come forward and been transferred.

As a further precaution, Whitefield said the company is also offering to "discuss" transfers with any female worker on the production line who identifies herself as anticipating a pregnancy.

Meanwhile, AT&T officials say they are undertaking a survey of employees' health histories to see if there is any evidence of health problems among its computer chip workers similar to those found in the Digital study.

"We are going through a process of evaluating if there is anything out of the norm in the health of our employees," Whitefield said.

In all, the company said it makes computer chips for its own use and sale on the market at facilities in Allentown and Reading, Pa., and in Orlando, Fla., and Kansas City, Mo. In addition, it said, a Bell Laboratories facility in Pennsylvania makes computer chips.

The Digital study, done by the University of Massachusetts School of Public Health, was commissioned by the company following employee reports of abnormally high miscarriages at Digital's Hudson plant. The study, which involved virtually all the plant's production-line workers, is the first to look at overall health of semiconductor workers.

In addition to a higher rate of miscarriages, the study also reported significantly higher employee reports of headaches, nausea and rashes among production-line workers than nonproduction-line employees.

But it also looked for and found no evidence of a wide range of other health problems — including birth defects.

Digital has offered to transfer any of its female production-line workers at the plant who are of child-bearing age and have concerns about future pregnancy.