

# Study says job hazards go unrecognized

By Bruce D. Butterfield  
Globe Staff  
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Many electronics and chemical companies in Massachusetts fail to recognize the danger of reproductive disorders posed by chemicals they use, or have adopted safeguards that are inadequate, a Department of Health study finds.

In some cases, authors of the study say, companies are following possibly discriminatory practices in attempting to identify pregnant women and keep them off production lines.

In other cases, they are mistakenly removing workers who are at low risk of developing disorders and leaving those at higher risk on the job.

The findings are contained in a major survey of 198 companies obtained by The Boston Globe. Department of Health officials say it is the first industry-wide examination of policies to deal with reproductive hazards in the workplace.

It paints a picture of widespread confusion and uncertainty over what to do about reproductive hazards faced by thousands of workers—both male and female—in chemical, computer and electronics firms.

"There's definitely a lack of awareness about reproductive hazards among [these] firms. We've got to get better education going out there," said Dr. Maureen Paul of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, a coauthor of the study.

Paul said researchers did not measure actual exposure levels of workers in the companies surveyed. But she maintained that ignorance about the hazards to reproductive health indicated workers in some cases may be facing real risks.

The study, conducted jointly by UMass Medical Center and the Department of Health, calls for expanded funding of programs to educate both workers and employers in the high-tech industry and for the creation of a special task force.

Among the study's major findings:

- Fifty-three percent of all firms surveyed reported use of one or more of four known reproductive hazards in production. Only 40 percent of those firms, however, said they knew the substances might affect reproductive health.

The reproductive hazards were glycol ethers, lead, organic mercury and radiation.

- No companies transferred men from production lines, although the study noted that glycol ethers, for example, were a greater risk to men's reproductive systems than women's.

Of companies that take health histories of workers, the study found that a third of them asked female workers when they were hired if they were pregnant. Two conducted pregnancy tests when women were hired.

Authors of the study said some policies followed by the companies may be discriminatory. But the report's main focus was on the wide difference in practices adopted by firms that acknowledge potential reproductive threats and are trying to protect workers.

It also focused on the lack of recognition by other firms that chemicals or processes they use may cause reproductive disorders in their employees.

Fewer than half of all companies surveyed provided any information on potential hazards to workers.

The study concluded that: "the lack of accurate knowledge about reproductive hazards in the workplace as well as the tendency to identify reproduction exclusively with pregnant women has led to policies which are often inappropriate."

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**Some workers shifted**  
Cynthia Daniels, coordinator of occupational health for the Department of Health and a coauthor of the study, applauded those firms that were trying to protect pregnant workers by shifting them to other jobs within the company.

She also noted that the survey found it was done at no loss in pay.

Both Daniels and Paul noted that while pregnant women primarily were singled out for transfers, reproductive hazards often were as great for women of child-bearing age who were not pregnant. They also insisted that men too were at risk if exposed to the hazards, but that fact was ignored by employers.

### Aware of hazards

"The answer is not to remove the worker, but to remove the [toxic] substance," said Paul.

Christopher Anderson, a spokesman for the Massachusetts High Tech Council, said he has not yet seen the survey. But he said major firms in the industry were aware of hazards connected with toxic chemicals and are moving toward substituting as many of those chemicals as possible.

The 198 firms surveyed included 49 chemical companies and 149 computer and electronics firms.

## L.A. TIMES Dec 31 1988 Premature Loss of Ability to Focus Eyes Linked to VDT Use

By 1990, perhaps 70 million people will be working at VDTs—video display terminals—and that figure does not include those who use computers at home. Many people who spend their workdays in front of terminals suffer from eyestrain (visual fatigue, headache, eye irritation, and similar symptoms.)

But according to a report published last year in the Journal of Occupational Medicine, these problems were judged no worse than those caused by any close work and were "not unique to VDTs."

Now, however, clinical findings at the UC Berkeley School of Optometry suggest that working regularly at a VDT may cause a premature loss in the eye's ability to focus. Dr. James Sheedy, chief of the VDT clinic at the university, emphasized that his evidence is preliminary and that his conclusions are based on people who had come to the clinic with eye problems—namely on a controlled study.

screen, you should have your eyes checked annually. And when you have your checkup, tell your eye-care professional that you work at a screen. Keep the following pointers in mind:

- If you already have corrective lenses, you may need a special prescription for work at a terminal. Your regular reading glasses, designed to focus at about 18 inches, may not be right for VDT work if the screen is farther away.

- Bifocals may not be well suited for VDT work because the near-vision part of the lens is designed for looking down. Even trifocals may not help, since the field of vision in the medium-distance range will be too narrow to take in the whole screen. If you wear glasses and use a VDT, you will probably find that single-vision lenses are best for this distance.

Other ways to cut eyestrain:  
• Choose nonreflective glass screens.

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