

Talking to Your Boss About Your Bump: Washington, DC

This fact sheet focuses on DC law. Protections will differ in other states. In addition, you may be protected by federal law through the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Pregnancy Discrimination Act.¹ Visit babygate.abetterbalance.org/dc/ for more information.

WHEN to break the news:

- There are no real legal deadlines for notifying your employer until late in your pregnancy, when you will need to request leave 30 days in advance of taking off for childbirth, if you are covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act, or give a reasonable prior notice of your need for leave under the DC Family and Medical Leave Act.
- If you need time off for pregnancy-related illness, or you need another workplace change to accommodate your pregnancy, you may have to break the news earlier.
- If you suspect that your boss won't be happy to hear you are pregnant, don't feel pressure to tell before you are ready. However, keep in mind that your colleagues and boss may appreciate being told as soon as you feel comfortable, so that they, and you, can plan ahead.

WHAT to say:

- Before starting the conversation, it's a good idea to do your homework and review your employer's policies about pregnancy and parental leave. You may also want to consult with human resources.
- Reassure your boss that you are committed to your job and that you plan to return to work after the baby arrives. Many bosses wrongly assume that pregnancy means the end of an employee's dedication and reliability. It's important to tackle those assumptions up front.
- Stress that you are willing and able to keep working—even if your pregnancy impacts your work, it will be a short-term situation, like a temporary disability. You don't need a doctor's note to announce your pregnancy, and in fact, sometimes a note can cause trouble if your boss thinks it limits what you can do on the job.
- Highlight that you are a breadwinner (or primary earner) for your family, and your household depends on your paycheck.
- If you have access to parental leave,² come armed with a plan help your boss prepare for your absence and cover your workload while you are gone.



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¹ The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission enforces the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which cover employers nationwide who have 15 or more employees. The PDA makes it illegal for your employer to punish you because of your pregnancy or to treat you differently than other workers because you are pregnant. The ADA protects you from discrimination and entitles you to reasonable accommodations if you have a pregnancy-related disability, such as hypertension, preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, or another pregnancy-related impairment that substantially limits a major life activity.

- Listen carefully and take careful notes after your conversation, especially about anything that sounded strange or wrong to you.
- Unfair treatment based on pregnancy (e.g. firing, penalizing, or harassing you upon learning you are pregnant) is illegal.

Workplace Accommodations

Under a DC law,³ you have a right to a reasonable accommodation to address known limitations related to your pregnancy or childbirth, or breastfeeding, unless providing an accommodation would impose an undue hardship on your employer (significant difficulty or expense). For example, you may ask for:

- acquisition or modification of equipment,
- more frequent or longer breaks,
- temporary transfer to less strenuous or hazardous position,
- assistance with manual labor,
- job restructuring such as light duty or a modified work schedule,
- time off to recover from childbirth,
- refraining from heavy lifting,
- relocating your work area,
- a private, non-bathroom space for expressing breast milk, or
- other accommodations that would address your known conditions.

Have a conversation with your medical provider about your job duties to understand if you may need changes at work because of pregnancy, childbirth, a related medical condition, and/or breastfeeding. Keep in mind that your needs may change over the course of your pregnancy. If you do want to seek an accommodation, keep reading!

HOW to ask for an accommodation:

- Tell your boss that you have a condition arising from your pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, or related medical condition and that you need a reasonable accommodation on the job. To receive an accommodation under the DC law, you should explain what your pregnancy-related limitations are (e.g., can't lift more than 50 pounds; can't stand for more than four hours without taking a break; must drink water regularly; etc.).
- For accommodation ideas, see the list above or look at The Center for Worklife Law's list of pregnancy-related conditions and possible workplace accommodations: www.pregnantatwork.org/wp-content/uploads/Workable-Accommodation-Ideas.pdf.

² DC has a leave law that is similar to the FMLA—the District of Columbia Family and Medical Leave Act (DC FMLA). If your employer has at least 20 employees and you qualify, you can get up to 16 weeks of unpaid time off in a two-year period (instead of FMLA's 12 weeks in a one-year period). Read more at: <http://babygate.abetterbalance.org/dc/>.

³ Protecting Pregnant Workers Fairness Act of 2014, D.C. Act. 20-458 (2014).

- Specify what kind of accommodation you need, including any job duties that you need modified, and make sure your boss knows you can still perform the bulk of the duties of your job. Refer your boss to the Job Accommodation Network (<http://askjan.org/soar/other/preg.html>) for more information and ideas.
- Come prepared with a plan—what kind of changes do you need and how can you make that work? Talk with coworkers and enlist their help.
- Explain how your requested accommodation will not be too difficult or expensive for the company (e.g. it's time limited, another employee is willing to help you on occasion with the task you can't perform, etc.).
- If your boss requires a note from your doctor to confirm your medical need (which they may do under the law), make sure that the note is as specific as possible and outlines exactly what you can and cannot do at work. Avoid vague terms like “heavy lifting” or “light duty,” which may be interpreted by your boss to mean you can no longer do your job. Be aware that employers often use doctor's notes to say that pregnant women can't do their jobs and to push them out of the workplace, either by forcing them onto leave before they are ready or by firing them outright. Here are guidelines on writing effective work accommodation notes that you can print and share with your prenatal care provider:
www.pregnantatwork.org/wp-content/uploads/washington-dc-work-note-guidelines.pdf.
- Make sure to get any conversation with your employer documented in writing—you may send an e-mail or note summing up what was discussed and keep a copy for your records.

Your employer's obligations:

- When you ask your employer for an accommodation, it should be a two-way conversation—your boss must engage with you. If she asks for additional information to understand your limitation, you should provide it. Your boss may ask you to bring in a note from a healthcare professional to confirm the medical advisability of a reasonable accommodation.
- You are not entitled to receive your first choice accommodation, but your boss cannot send you out on leave if there is any other reasonable accommodation available that would address your pregnancy-related limitation(s) and cannot force you to accept an accommodation that you do not need.
- Your employer may not retaliate against you (e.g., fire, penalize, or harass you) for requesting or using an accommodation.
- The law says your employer has to post up these rights where you can see them (like the break room) and include them in your employee handbook.

Questions? Call:
A Better Balance at (212) 430-5982
Center for Worklife Law at (415) 703-8276