

## Taking maternity leave—how best to prepare

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Having a child can be one of life's miraculous joys. If you are a working woman, adequate planning for your maternity leave is essential to ensure a smooth transition for everyone involved — you, your family, your co-workers and your employer. "There are number of ways to prepare for this transition; understanding your family leave options is an important first step in the process," says Robynn Pease, Ph.D., director of work-life at the University of Kentucky. "This is a time when planning ahead is essential." Here are ways to prepare.

Consider how much time you would like to take off. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees employees working in firms with 50 or more employees up to three months leave. If you work for a firm with fewer than 50 employers, you will need to discuss your leave options with your employer. While ideally you may want to take at least three months off from work, the length of your leave may be determined by whether or not you will need an income.

Determine your options to ensure a steady income. Once you determine the length of leave for which you are eligible — and assuming you need an income during your maternity leave — next you'll need to determine whether you're eligible to receive a paycheck during that length of leave. Since the United States is one of four nations (along with Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland), that do not guarantee paid time-off to new mothers you may need to cobble together several options.

If you are an employee who annually accrues sick, personal and vacation leave, stockpiling your paid leave for maternity leave will ensure a steady paycheck for the time you have accrued. Women, and in some cases men, can access Temporary Disability Insurance — either privately or through their employer — to guarantee some form of income during maternity leave. Tonya Smith, an administrative specialist in the Commonwealth of Kentucky's Personnel Cabinet, recently returned to work from a six-week maternity leave for the birth of her second child. She was able to patch together sick and vacation time she had saved since working for the state. "This was not the case with my first child. I did not have enough sick and vacation time to take a six-week paid maternity leave. I was able to take paid time off because my co-workers helped me out through the Commonwealth of Kentucky's sick leave sharing program." The states allows employees with more than 75 hours of sick leave to donate their time to co-workers in need. Lauren Rousseau, an accounts payable supervisor at Vanguard, a general contractor based in Paducah, was able to take 4 weeks of paid leave by supplementing her accrued sick and vacation time with a private temporary disability insurance policy.

Establish a plan for how your job will get done. At least three months prior to your departure, you'll need to meet with your supervisor to decide how your job responsibilities will be covered

in your absence. "There a few options," said Pease. "The workload can be distributed to co-workers, or a temp-worker could be hired for the duration of the leave. It really depends on the nature of the work which option to choose." Both Smith and Rousseau relied on co-workers to take over their responsibilities while they were gone. " I knew this would be a big transition for my co-workers," said Smith. To ease this burden, about three months prior to their leave, both women started documenting all their job functions. Lauren did this by keeping a log of all her job responsibilities in a three-ring binder along with "cheat notes" for how to handle certain situations.

Make a communication plan. While you are on leave, your co-workers or the temp-person may have questions. Plan ahead — how do you want to handle these or other questions that may arise at work that normally would require your input? Would you prefer to communicate via email or phone? Do you want to be informed on all matters, or just major ones? Either way, make sure that you, your colleagues and your supervisor are all in agreement about a communication plan before you leave.

Secure child care. Caring for your child when you return to work is a major worry for working parents. Will you be relying on family members or friends to care for your child? Or will you rely on some form of center-based care? If it is the latter, there are a number of matters that will inform your decision — age of your child, cost, quality and location of the center. You'll want to consider a plan for when your child becomes ill. Prepare for several different options. You and your partner may alternate who takes time off from work, or you may pre-arrange to have a family member or family friend serve as "back-up" child care when necessary.

Request a private and secure place to pump. The decision to breast feed and for how long is a very personal decision. However, it becomes a very public one if you decide to breast feed for longer than your leave period. If this is the case, request that your supervisor or employer find you a private, clean and secure room in which you can pump. "A stall in the women's bathroom is not acceptable," asserts Pease. "It is not a private place, and it is an unsanitary place for pumping milk." Pease suggests that in addition to the room, women will need access to a refrigerator and to at least 2 30-minute breaks. All the women I interviewed for this article opted to stop breast feeding before they returned to work because they did not want to deal with this matter at work. However, many other women are successful in doing so, particularly if they have planned ahead of time with securing space and time for pumping.

Decide how you'll transition back to work. After the birth or adoption of your child, you'll need to decide if you want to return to work full-time, or reduce your work hours. This issue should be discussed months prior to your maternity leave. Likewise, you'll want to decide how you'll return to work. Do you want to return to work gradually? That is, do you want to work from home for a few weeks if the job allows, or work part-time for a few weeks, slowly returning to a full-time schedule? Pease suggests that there are number of ways to transition back to work after maternity leave. "Flexible work arrangements can work well for employees and employers as long as the details have been worked out ahead of time." Lauren Rousseau returned to work by working flexibly. After her four-week leave, she transitioned "back to work" by working from

home for two additional weeks prior to returning to the office. "This arrangement worked well; I was away from the job for less time, yet I had a few additional weeks to prepare myself for returning to work full-time with a newborn."

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