

BACKGROUND

WHY CURRENT PROVISIONS IN COMPASSIONATE CARE, MATERNITY, AND PARENTAL LEAVE UNDER THE FEDERAL *EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE PROGRAM* ARE NOT ADEQUATE

What are the basic facts about the Employment Insurance program?

It is the federal government that provides benefits for Canadians taking maternity leave, parental leave and/or compassionate care leave under the *Employment Insurance (EI) Program*. It is administered by the department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (formerly Human Resources Development Canada), and is legislated under the *Employment Insurance (EI) Act*. Generally, *EI* provides income supports to Canadians who are temporarily unemployed. However, two specific parts of the *EI* program address maternity, parental, and compassionate care leave, which have direct impacts on new multiple-birth parents. *EI* benefits do not distinguish between single births and multiple-births. The benefit period for all births is 52 weeks.

What is maternity leave?

Sickness and maternity benefits are only available to the birth mother, and are paid at an average 55% of earnings. Including pregnancy, birth and thereafter, a mother is eligible to the following:

- Special benefits (SICKNESS): 15 weeks maximum
 - A medical practitioner's document is required in addition to a special benefits claim. Examples would include cases of bed rest prior to the delivery of the baby/babies;
 - Conditions: Mother can only receive these benefits: (a) (i) Eight weeks before the week in which her confinement is expected, and (ii) the week in which her confinement occurs; and (b) that the benefit ends 17 weeks after the later of (i) the week in which her confinement is expected, and (ii) the week in which her confinement occurs;
 - Once the baby/babies are born, the claim immediately transfers to MATERNITY benefits, regardless of the mother's health.
- MATERNITY benefits: 15 weeks maximum
 - To be eligible, the mother must have worked 600 hours of insurable earnings (in the last 52 weeks or since last *EI* claim) to qualify;
 - Conditions: Can only be granted to the birth mother or surrogate mother;
 - Note: Can start to use maternity benefits up to 8 weeks before delivery.

Unique challenges

"Much of the stress could be eased and even avoided if parents had an extra year (or longer in the case of triplets or more) at home. This support will help families cope with their unique challenges, and to more fully enjoy their children and special parenting experience."

Linda G. Leonard, Associate Professor (E.),
Multiple Births Support Program,
UBC School of Nursing,
Multiple Births Canada Advisory Board member.



What is parental leave?

Parental benefits may be granted to the mother or father. The parents can split the parental leave benefits between themselves. They are payable, also at 55% of earnings, either to the biological or adoptive parents while they are caring for a newborn or an adopted child.

- PARENTAL LEAVE: 35 week maximum
 - To be eligible, biological or adoptive parents are required to have worked 600 hours of insurable earnings (in the last 52 weeks or since last EI claim);
 - Conditions: Parent must sign a statement declaring the newborn's date of birth, or, when there is an adoption, the child's date of placement for the purpose of the adoption, and the name and address of the adoption authority;
 - The weekly EI benefit amount and the number of weeks to be paid remain the same even if you give birth to more than one child at the same time.

What is compassionate care leave?

Announced in January 2004, this special benefit can be shared among eligible family members to provide compassionate care for a gravely ill or dying child, parent, or spouse or common law spouse. This benefit is available to employees who must be absent from work due to the serious medical condition of their family member who has a significant risk of death within six months. A medical certificate must be provided indicating the sick family member is gravely ill and there is a need for the claimant to be absent from the workplace to look after the family member.

- The qualifying conditions for the benefit are the same as the EI Special Benefits rules. A claimant requires 600 hours of insurable employment to qualify for compassionate care. A 26 week window would apply within which benefits could be claimed starting from the week in which the medical certificate has been completed or the week the certificate identifies the start of the 26 week period during which a family member has a grave illness with a significant risk of death. The claimant would collect benefits any time within that 26-week period. Eligible family members could claim weeks of compassionate benefits concurrently or consecutively. The total benefit cannot be greater than 6 weeks.
- Family members that are eligible to claim compassionate care benefits are limited to the following relationships:
 - Claimant's spouse or common-law partner;
 - Claimant's parent (mother or father), spouse of the claimant's parent or common-law partner of the claimant's parent;
 - Claimant's child or child of the claimant's spouse or common-law partner.

Parents require more time

"The findings of my extensive research on the multiple birth experience and its implications on parenting and educating reveal that bearing and caring for multiples differs exponentially from bearing and caring for single-born children, no matter how close in age single-born children may be to one another. The designation of "high-risk" attached to all multiple-births communicates the increased physical risk placed on both mother and children. Overall it is clear that parents of multiples require more time and resources from Employment Insurance to accommodate the copious and complex particulars of bearing and caring for multiples. Often these benefits are needed well before their children are born, as a result of the physical and emotional demands placed on multiple-birth pregnancies, and beyond their first year of development."

Audrey Huberman, Ed.D. (Curriculum, Teaching and Learning), Multiple-birth Specialist, Multiple Births Canada Advisory Board member.



Why do parents with multiple-birth infants require additional time at home and extended EI benefits?

Since medical and health problems such as high blood pressure, anemia and preterm labour are more common in multiple-birth pregnancies, early sick leave is often necessary. For example, reduction in physical activity, and physician prescribed extended bed-rest is common (especially women expecting triplets or more) As a result, a portion of EI benefits is often exhausted before the birth of the babies, leaving less time after the birth to be at home caring for them.

Maternal stress can contribute to a preterm birth. Expectant parents of multiples face extraordinary financial, physical and emotional stress associated with the impending birth and planning to care for two, three or more babies at once. Having to take an early maternity leave can add to this stress. Sixty percent of multiples are born **pre-term** - prior to 37-weeks' gestation.

Compared to parents with a single baby, parents who give birth to two, three or more babies need more time at home for the following reasons:

1. Since mothers of multiples are more likely to have a caesarean delivery and other **pregnancy complications**, they experience delayed recovery, and difficulty in holding, carrying and caring for infants.
2. Over half of all multiple-birth infants are **born early and/or too small**, are more vulnerable and at greater risk of infant death, and have short and long term health problems. In particular:
 - Many require extended **neonatal care**;
 - Premature babies require more **frequent feedings** and vigilant care;
 - **Developmental delays** and Cerebral Palsy are common and may require parents to commit to intensive and ongoing involvement in therapies throughout the first few years;
 - Multiples have an increased risk of **congenital anomalies**, monozygotic twins in particular;
 - When a major defect occurs in monozygotic twins, 80 percent of the time, only one child is affected. Again, the bonding and attachment processes are further challenged by the complex parental attitudes that accompany these discrepancies.
 - **Stillbirths and infant deaths are nearly five times greater.** Parents experiencing this anguish need extra time to grieve for their lost baby(ies) and yet cope with caring for the survivors and managing the home;
 - When one or more of the babies need prolonged hospitalization while the healthier multiple(s) is released from the hospital, it adds stress for the parents if they need to **travel** back and forth to an out of town hospital to visit sick baby(ies) and at the same time care for the baby(ies) and/or other siblings at home. This situation can have a negative impact on both the breastfeeding and attachment processes.
 - Low and discrepant birth weights between multiples can compound the **parental perceptions** and attitudes that influence the bonding and attachment processes. The maternal and paternal emotional attachment process takes longer and is more complex.

Need for support

"Because the numbers of triplets are increasing, the need for financial and social support for parents during the first months of infant life is clear. Without such organized assistance, it cannot be expected that the mother will form the unique, sensitive, individualized relationship that is necessary for these high-risk infants." R. Feldman and A.L. Eidelman, "Does a triplet birth pose a special risk for infant development? Assessing cognitive development in relation to intrauterine growth and mother-infant interaction across the first 2 years" Pediatrics, Vol. 115, No. 2, February 2005.

3. **Physical and emotional stress** due to the demands of caring for the babies, other siblings (if any), and running the household:
 - Without additional support, it is very difficult for parents with triplets (or more) to hold and **transport** several babies at the same time;
 - Many mothers suffer from **sleep deprivation**, but still maintain an unrelenting workload, unless professional help is acquired;
 - Mothers of multiples require informed, sufficient and sustained **support to breastfeed** their infants successfully;
 - Parents must **divide their attention** between two (or more) children with similar developmental needs which is likely to affect the quantity and quality of interactions experienced by each infant.

4. Parents often face a **financial dilemma** – they assume extraordinary financial commitments yet if they return to the paid labour force, suitable childcare for two or more babies can be very expensive and difficult to find. For instance:
 - Purchasing **special equipment** such as strollers;
 - A **larger vehicle** to accommodate several infant car seats safely within the law;
 - A larger home or renovations may be needed;
 - Compared to the first year costs of basic infant needs for a single baby, expenses are \$5,000.00 higher for twins, \$10,000.00 higher for triplets, and \$17,000.00 higher for quadruplets;
 - Consistent **volunteer help** is difficult to find. To purchase additional in-home support services can cost as much as \$7,000.00 for the first year;
 - Daycare costs (without subsidies) for one set of twins under the age 2 is approximately \$10,000.00 per year

5. Due to the combined physical, emotional and financial stress associated with parenting 2, 3 or more babies, families with multiple-birth children are at **higher risk** (compared to that of singletons) of:
 - Family dysfunction and child abuse
 - Post Partum Depression

International perspective

There are other countries that have special provisions for incidences of multiple-births imbedded in their maternity/parental leave programs. For example, in Sweden, an extra six months leave per child is in effect. In Iceland, the arrival of multiples can afford families an extra three months leave. In Italy, a total of twenty months of leave is accorded to incidences of multiple-births; and in Luxembourg parents can take an additional four weeks' leave.

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