

Distinguishing Between Baby Blues and Post-Partum Depression

If symptoms don't resolve within a couple of weeks, talk to your doctor

Post-partum depression is an adverse change in mood and behaviors related to pregnancy and childbirth, and the cause is often debated.

Some believe hormonal changes during pregnancy and childbirth are primarily responsible. Others believe it's caused, or aggravated by, exhaustion from childbirth and lack of sleep, along with the daily stress that comes with caring for a newborn.

Symptoms include sadness, anxiety, tearfulness, increased irritability, and trouble sleeping.

When symptoms appear within a few days of delivery and go away without treatment within two weeks after giving birth, it is referred to as "baby blues."

However, about 10 to 20 percent of women develop post-partum depression, which can be intense and last from weeks to a year. Women suffering from post-partum depression frequently feel unable to take care of themselves and the baby. Daily tasks, such as dressing, working at home or at their job, seem impossible.

"When a newborn comes home, it's a joyful event and the beginning of a new life full of hope and happiness, but for some the colors of life suddenly disappear," said Psychiatrist Philippe Sioufi, MD, medical director of the Center for Recovery and Wellness at Merrimack Valley Hospital. "Confused and lost, despair sets in. The lucky ones are those who find the light again by seeking help early on, which is very important in the management of

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post-partum depression, to improve the well-being of children, mothers and families."

Women are often too ashamed to tell others, including their husband or partner, and afraid to talk about their symptoms, which can include thoughts and fears about harming their baby – because they fear their baby may be taken away.

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of psychotherapy and psychopharmacologic intervention," said Neuropsychologist Buck H. Woo, PhD, program director of the Center for Recovery and Wellness at Merrimack Valley Hospital. "With professional help almost all women overcome their feelings and are able to take good care of themselves and their children."

Mothers having hallucinations or delusions about themselves or their baby should contact their health care provider right away, or go to the emergency room, as this could be a condition called post-partum psychosis - the most severe and rarest post-partum reaction, and it is an emergency requiring immediate medical help.

Women most at risk for post-partum depression are those who have a history of depression or anxiety disorders, or who have had post-partum depression before. Other factors that may increase risk include:

- A history of moderate to severe premenstrual syndrome
- Depression or anxiety during pregnancy
- A family history of depression, anxiety disorders, or alcohol abuse
- A stressful event
- Lack of emotional support
- Low self-esteem
- Trouble managing stress
- Unrealistic ideas about motherhood
- Lack of sleep
- An unwanted pregnancy
- A complicated pregnancy
- Having a newborn with physical or behavioral problems

Merrimack Valley Hospital, an acute care medical hospital, has a Center for Behavioral Medicine that offers three distinct services.

The Center for Recovery and Wellness assists adults struggling with anxiety, depression, mood disorders and associated behaviors. **978-521-8617**

The Senior Adult Behavioral Medicine Center is for patients 55 and older with emotional conditions that require hospitalization. **978-521-8360**

The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment provides 24-hour inpatient care as well as outpatient programs for those struggling with addiction. **978-521-8485**



Psychiatrist Philippe Sioufi, MD, medical director of the Center for Recovery and Wellness at Merrimack Valley Hospital, reassures a new mother struggling with post partum depression.