

Idaho Falls Post Register, Tuesday, April 19, 2011 -- by Emma Breysse (2 pages)

Eastern Idaho a hot spot for pregnancy resources

Carla Mason of Rexburg thinks eastern Idaho is a great place to have a baby. With her first child due in August, the past few months have been a crash course in discovering the area's resources for expectant mothers.

"All you have to do to find things is Google pregnancy, or even women's health care," she said. "A lot of the health care resources out there are there for you."

Area hospitals are working hard to attract expecting moms as patients. They are spiffing up maternity wards and beefing up educational offerings in hopes of meeting demand brought on by the region's consistently high birth rate. "This area has a much larger per capita birth rate than most places, and that means a greater demand for those kinds of resources," said Coleen Niemann, spokeswoman for Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center.

Last summer, in announcing a \$20 million renovation of EIRMC's Women and Infants Center, hospital CEO Doug Crabtree said the hospital delivered as many as 27 babies in a single day in 2010. While that day was out of the norm, it highlighted the need for expanded maternity facilities and services. More than 1,500 babies were born at the hospital in 2010.

The renovations Crabtree announced last summer are nearly complete. A new 24,000-square-foot wing is scheduled to be finished in May. It includes the labor and delivery area, patient rooms, nursing stations and common areas. It also increases Neonatal Intensive Care Unit capacity.

In Rexburg, Madison Memorial Hospital also began renovation of its maternity wing last year with the addition of new birthing beds in the Labor and Delivery Unit.

The full renovation is expected to cost around \$630,000, said Sharon Pirente, president of the Madison Memorial Hospital Foundation. The foundation is the hospital's fundraising arm. "Right now, remodeling the labor and delivery unit is one of our big priorities," Pirente said. "It hasn't really been redone in 10 years."

Ten years ago, Madison County had 503 births, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. In 2009, the most recent reporting year, that number was 1,046.

Area hospitals are also pitching their maternity wards as "spalike" facilities that provide individualized care and easy access to information. Mountain View Hospital in Idaho Falls touts its Labor and Delivery Department's Jacuzzi tubs and homey feel, along with a full slate of classes in everything from infant massage to newborn care.

EIRMC and Madison Memorial also offer classes for nearly every step of pregnancy. Efforts to reach Bingham Memorial Hospital were unsuccessful.

Melissa Kirtley, who teaches a newborn care class once a month at EIRMC, said her classroom is usually full. "There's definitely a lot of demand for this information," she said.

Jenifer Wilde of Idaho Falls had her second child in September. She has noticed a definite shift since her first child was born five years ago. "It does seem lately that a lot of places are stepping up the service to new mothers," she said. "There are a lot of choices, and the hospitals seem like they're becoming aware of that."

By the numbers

With the exception of 2009, births in eastern Idaho have risen since 2001. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare tracks annual births by county. The most recent data available is from 2009. The following combines information from Public Health Districts 6 and 7, which comprise eastern and southeastern Idaho.

Births per year	2005 -- 6,618
2001 -- 5,519	2006 -- 6,724
2002 -- 5,730	2007 -- 7,066
2003 -- 6,161	2008 -- 7,345
2004 -- 6,267	2009 -- 6,936