



## JEWISH AND HASSIDIC JEWISH POPULATIONS

### **Overview:**

Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions, and was the first major one to recognize one god (monotheism), rather than pantheism (multiple gods). Judaism has been practiced for thousands of years. It eventually gave rise to Christianity 2,000 years ago, and then Islam.

Jews as an ethnic group originated in the Middle East several thousand years ago, but throughout history have experienced a number of waves of dispersion across Europe, Asia, and Africa due to political upheavals, war, and ethnic cleansing.

### **Language and Religion:**

The native language of Jews in Israel today is Hebrew. However, because Jews can be found in many countries throughout the world, they will usually speak the native language of that state. Most Jews in the United States speak English as their first language. In Postville, Iowa, many of the ultra conservative Jews are originally from New York, so they speak English. However, others are from Israel and speak Hebrew. No matter where they are from, though, most of the Hassidics in Postville will know Hebrew, as it is their sacred and preferred language. Health workers in Iowa will generally need to work with a Hebrew translator with this population, unless the audience is extremely comfortable in English.

Jews are one of the smallest but most active minority populations in the United States. Jews are extremely diverse among themselves. Those of European origin are called Ashkenazi Jews, while those of Middle Eastern or non-European origin are called Sephardic Jews.

Jews may be secular (non-religious) or religious. Those that are religious may be reform (not very traditional), conservative, or orthodox (very traditional). While reform and conservative Jews may be found throughout Iowa, particularly in its larger cities, one of the most significant concentrations of ultra-orthodox Jews can be found in tiny Postville, Iowa. These ultra-orthodox Jews in Postville are called Hassidic Jews from the Lubavitcher sect.

Jews greatly resent, in general, any efforts to convert them to Christianity. Most are keenly aware of historical events such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism, which caused large numbers of Jews to be killed by Christians or forced to convert. In their faith, a person born to a Jewish mother is believed to be a Jew. Most people are therefore born into Judaism, rather than convert to it.

Health workers should be aware of different Jewish calendar issues. Do not operate programs on the Jewish Sabbath, which begins Friday at sundown and ends Saturday at sundown. Also, do not operate programs during Jewish holidays, such as Passover in the spring; Rosh ha Shana (New Year's day in the fall); or Yom Kippur (a full day of complete fasting in the fall). Jews are not Christians, and therefore do not celebrate Christmas and Easter. Sunday is a working day in Israel, as it is in the Postville kosher meatpacking plant. Most Jewish holidays begin at sunset one day, and end at sunset one or more days later.

**Family and Social Structure:**

Most Hassidic, ultra-orthodox Jews marry young and have very large families.

Among conservative Jews, male and female roles are well defined. The men tend to be the heads of household and wage earners, while the women are in charge of the family and home. Many of the Hassidic women also are active in volunteer service for their community.

Health providers should respect the well-defined gender roles among ultra-orthodox Jews. Men should not hug, shake hands, pat the back, or otherwise touch women out of respect. Physical contact between the sexes is usually reserved only for spouses or younger children. Many Hassidic men, when passing women in a hall or on the road, will typically look down or cover their eyes so as not to infer sexual interest in the females. Ultra-orthodox Jewish men may not hide their unwillingness to interact with secular female health professionals.

Many of the ultra-orthodox Hassidic Jewish children study in religious schools. In general, their literacy rates are high. They use technology like computers, cars, and phones.

Conservative Hassidic Jews will usually wear very modest, dark clothes. Women usually wear long, beautiful dresses or skirts and dark stockings, with their arms fully covered by sleeves. Hats or wigs are used to cover their hair. Religious Jewish men will wear a kipa or yarmulke, which is a skullcap or small covering for the back of the head. This will usually never be removed in public. Health professionals that work regularly with Hassidics should take care to dress modestly as well and respect these traditions.

**Communication Style:**

Israelis and Jews in general are extremely warm, passionate, and outgoing people with a sharp sense of humor. Where possible, health educators should also use this same communication style. The Jews also appreciate language that is frank and direct. They are a highly verbal culture that values analytical sparring, so health educators should be aware that it is often difficult to lecture passively to this type of an audience. Question-and-answer sessions and open discussions are probably more effective.

Body spacing is usually fairly close in this culture, and physical contact to show affection is common among many Israelis. However, among the more conservative Hassidic Jews, men and women are generally much more likely to avoid inappropriate contact with each other. Where possible, women health providers should work with Hassidic Jewish women clients, and vice versa for men.

Israelis, like other Middle Eastern populations, place a profound emphasis on respect and hospitality. Health workers will usually need to take the time to discuss other personal issues with this population, before getting down to business with the clients.

**Barriers to Care and Common Health Conditions:**

Jewish populations in the United States usually do not have significant financial barriers to care. Most American-born Jews that are not ultra-orthodox tend to utilize medical care frequently and early. They usually will have insurance, and take an active part in the own care. However, some of the lower-income Jews working in meatpacking plants in Iowa may not have adequate health insurance. They also may not know English and do not have enough providers that speak Hebrew. Because they are ultra-religious, they may not feel comfortable utilizing care in secular or Christian-based hospitals that are common in Iowa.

Among the Hassidic Jews working at meatpacking plants in Iowa, health concerns tend to focus on maternal and child topics, the prevention of chronic diseases like cancer, and occupational injuries.

**Bereavement:**

Most Jews believe that death will ultimately lead to resurrection in a future world.

Jews usually do not embalm their deceased. Instead, the dead are typically buried within 24 hours of their death, after ritual purification and dressing in a plain linen shroud. The body is usually watched over from the time of death until burial.

Jews will usually recite the Kaddish, a special prayer in honor of the dead. They will “sit shiva” for seven days, which means that they will curtail most daily activities and mourn out of respect for the dead. During shiva, they will often wear black and will cover mirrors and sit on low stools. A special candle will usually be lit to honor the dead. The full mourning period lasts one year, at which time a special “yahrtzeit” memorial ceremony is offered. Hassidic Jews honor an 11-month mourning period. Jews usually honor the anniversary of the death of a loved one for many years into the future.

Many Jews, particularly those of Sephardic background, will be highly expressive and visibly distraught when a loved one dies or is seriously ill. To remain stoic and silent, as is more common in dominant American culture, would imply lack of true feelings for the deceased.

**Traditional Health Practices:**

Jewish people, even if they are not religious, generally follow some level of Kosher dietary laws. These laws emphasize the use of food that is clean and easy to digest, and were first explained by Moses in the Jewish Torah, or the book Christians call the Old Testament. Health providers and hospitals, therefore, should be thoroughly familiar with Jewish dietary laws before attempting to discuss nutrition issues or meet their dietary needs. Most Jews will not eat pork, and usually do not mix milk and meat products together in the same meal. Israelis, in general, eat far more fresh produce than most Americans do.

Many Jews, particularly those that are Hassidic, have very strong fate and destiny values. They often will not directly speak words such as “cancer,” over the concern that it might predestine them to have bad luck with the disease.

Most Jews greatly value Western medical care and will access it frequently if financial and geographic barriers do not exist.

Most Jews will usually take an active role in maintaining their own health, and will frequently give advice to others on how to do the same. Many will also question their provider thoroughly about a particular treatment or medical process, and will expect detailed information.