



MUSLIM POPULATIONS

Overview:

Islam is one of the world's three great monotheistic religions, along with Judaism and Christianity. People that practice Islam are called Muslims. They share a belief with Christians and Jews in the Old Testament, but also follow the Muslim holy book, the Koran, and the teachings of the prophet Mohammad. They believe in the same god as Christians and Jews, and he is referred to as Allah. Jesus is recognized as a prophet and holy man, but not as a Messiah as in Christianity.

The Islamic faith came out of Middle Eastern traditions, like Christianity and Judaism, and is one of the fastest growing religions on earth. Many Muslims live in America, particularly in larger urban areas. However, even in Iowa, Muslims can be found in the Bosnian and Somali refugee communities, as well as in communities with Arab immigrant student populations.

Language and Religion:

The language spoken by Muslims in Iowa will vary, depending on ethnicity. For instance, among Muslim university students, Arabic will be common. However, Bosnian refugees in the state speak Bosnian. African American Muslims will usually speak English as their native language.

Muslims can range from being secular to very devout. For instance, most of the Bosnians in Iowa do not follow a strict interpretation of the faith, like gender segregation, modest dress codes, or regular worship at a mosque. However, the Somalis are much more religious, and will typically wear loose, long clothing, and have well-defined roles for men and women.

Devout Muslims worship at a mosque, not a church or synagogue. They do not celebrate Christmas, Easter, or other religious holidays that Christians practice. Friday is their holy day of rest and worship, not Sunday like Christians. They will generally greatly resent any efforts to convert them to Christianity, as they have a keen understanding of historical persecution of Muslims by Christians during the Crusades and other events.

Devout Muslims will usually pray five times a day, from the early morning through the evening. They will pray in the direction of Mecca, the holy city in Saudi Arabia, from wherever they are in the world. If Muslim patients are staying in a hospital, workers should be able to tell them what direction Saudi Arabia would be for them, so that the patients can pray to Mecca.

Most Muslims practice a month of fasting from sunup to sundown, called Ramadan. Its timing varies from year to year. No food, water, or smoking is allowed during this time. Devout Muslims do not drink alcohol at any time of the year.

Family and Social Structure:

Devout Muslims usually have well-defined, traditional roles for men and women. If you have religious clients, the sex of the provider should match the sex of the patient. Exposure of body parts of the Muslim patient should be kept to a minimum. Most will not like to be disrobed next to other family members as well, unless they are of the same sex. Clinicians should also not touch the patient's head or hair, unless necessary for an exam.

Muslims usually value large families, and greatly adore children. Birth control is not usually desired in devout families, because of the value placed on children. At the same time, the family has an obligation to take care of its elders, without institutionalization. Muslim women are greatly respected and revered for their role as mothers and keepers of the home.

Communication Style:

A general communication style is difficult to describe for Muslims in Iowa, as it will vary by ethnicity, not religion. As noted, Muslims in the state may be as diverse as Somali refugees, Arab university students, African American Muslims, or Bosnian refugees. In general, though, Muslims value a communication style that is respectful and honorable to others.

Barriers to Care and Common Health Conditions:

Hospitalized Muslims will usually have large numbers of family visiting at all hours, which should be accommodated if possible. The family members will often recite the Koran near the patient, which they would like to do discreetly. It would usually be inappropriate for them to pray in the chapel room of many hospitals, because they often have Christian crucifixes posted.

Bereavement:

Most Muslims believe that life on earth is to be spent preparing for another world after death.

Second-degree male relatives, such as uncles or cousins, should usually be the family contact in the event of a terminal illness prognosis for a patient. This person can then decide if the patient and/or immediate family should be told of the diagnosis.

In general, Muslims do not embalm. The body is usually washed and purified in a ritual manner, and then covered in a simple "kafan" cloth. If possible, only same-sex Muslims should handle the body after death. If this is not possible, non-Muslims should wear gloves so that they do not directly touch the body.

The deceased is buried in the ground directly upon completion of the funeral. The burial usually takes place fairly quickly after death. Direct burial in the ground is required by "shari'ah," or Islamic law.

Death is viewed as being predestined by God, and is just the beginning of eternal life. As such, some very religious Muslims may be quite stoic and calm in their mourning. The outward expression of grief through wailing and banging the chest is forbidden. Grieving is usually allowed for just three days.

In general, grief counseling is usually not accepted nor viewed as necessary.

Large numbers of extended family and friends will usually visit seriously ill or deceased patients. Mourners will join together to offer "janazah" prayers for heavenly compassion and forgiveness for the deceased. An additional janazah prayer will often be said upon burial.

Upon death in a hospital, providers should try to turn the face of the patient so that it faces Mecca. In the United States, this is west or southwest. Also, the head of the deceased should be elevated above the body.

Most Muslims will prefer to be buried in cemeteries set aside for followers of Islam.

Traditional Health Practices:

Traditional health practices of Muslims will primarily vary by ethnicity, rather than by religion. For further information, please refer to specific cultural information regarding Bosnians, Somalis, and others.

Abortion is not allowed in the Muslim religion. Circumcision is performed on all boys, although the timing can vary from birth until puberty. Premarital sex and adultery are forbidden in Islam.

Most Muslims do not eat pork products or other foods that are deemed unclean and unhygienic. Meat products will only be eaten if they are “halal,” or have been slaughtered according to strict practices. (This is somewhat similar to the “kosher” dietary rules in Judaism.) Hospital food and diets should be modified to meet their needs. They typically will share food, and are often taught not to eat to capacity. Some food, therefore, may remain untouched. Devout Muslims will also not eat any food product made with lard or animal fat, like some ice cream, gelatin, and fried foods. They also do not drink alcohol.

Muslims generally consider the right hand to be “clean,” and it is used for eating, shaking hands, and touching others. The left hand is considered “unclean,” and reserved for toileting and other such practices. Providers should minimize touching Muslim patients with their left hands. Ritual cleanliness of the body and home is usually extremely important to Muslims, particularly during times of prayer.

After birth, many Muslim parents will take the placenta and dispose of it for burial, in accordance with Islamic tradition. Fetuses after the age of 120 days are considered viable babies, and would require burial by Muslims.