



## **RUSSIANS AND OTHER IMMIGRANTS FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION**

### **Overview:**

A number of immigrants from Russia and other republics that formerly comprised the Soviet Union now live in Iowa. Many of them live in Northeast Iowa, and have recently arrived in the area as economic migrants. While they may once all have been part of the former U.S.S.R., they are nonetheless fairly diverse in a number of areas. Providers should not assume that they are all “Russian,” as a number of them are actually from the Ukraine, Latvia, Belorussia, or other republics.

### **Language and Religion:**

Most of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union will speak Russian, although they may also know the specific languages of the republics where they used to live, like Ukrainian. Health programming is best done in their native language.

Religion will vary by ethnic group. Some Russians are quite secular, having been raised in the former Soviet Union where organized religion was discouraged. Others will practice some form of Christianity, and may be Orthodox.

### **Family and Social Structure:**

In general, immigrants from Russia place great value on education, art, music, and fine culture. Although they may be working today in Iowa in meatpacking plants and other blue-collar jobs, many were professionals back in their home countries. They therefore will usually be fairly literate, although perhaps not in English. They will usually resent being treated by providers as “backwards” or “uneducated” immigrants.

These Russian families usually have strong extended family ties, even though the number of children may be relatively small in comparison to other immigrant groups. It is not unusual for Russian families to pool their money together to achieve a better lifestyle. Parents may take on extra work to help support their children’s education. Health programming that incorporates the entire family can be especially valuable.

### **Communication Style:**

Russians usually are highly verbal and fairly direct in their communications with other people. Most are extremely literate, well educated, and very knowledgeable about culture, economics, world history, and current affairs. They tend to enjoy intellectual conversations, and may expect the health provider to discuss these issues with them.

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

Cost, language, and transportation are the most significant barriers to care for immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Many work at jobs that do not provide health insurance, and few medical organizations have Russian translators. Others find it difficult to attend health clinics that are only open Monday through Friday during the daytime, since many Russians are working several jobs in meatpacking plants and have limited free time for off-site services.

Cultural barriers to accessing care also exist among Russian immigrants. Many typically will not seek formal medical care, except in more complicated cases. They will typically use some form of self-treatment, before ultimately seeking out a physician for care if they continue to be ill. Russians usually take an active role in maintaining their own health. Mothers are particularly involved in caring for their children's illnesses with alternative therapies. Many Russian immigrant women, particularly those that studied education in universities back home, will have had significant training in primary health skills as part of their curriculum.

In general, smoking and alcohol consumption rates tend to be fairly high among Russian immigrants, and are an integral part of their culture. Many Russians, particularly men, are able to consume relatively large amounts of alcohol gracefully, without obviously appearing to be intoxicated.

The former Soviet Union had a comprehensive, free national health care system for all residents, and elements of this system continue today in the independent republics. Many of the Eastern European newcomers to Iowa will have little understanding of American concepts of private party insurance, fee-for-service care, and other elements. Many will need assistance navigating the health care system in their new community, and will often want to seek out Russian speaking physicians if they are available.

Mental illnesses generally carried a strong negative stigma in the former Soviet Union, where these conditions were often treated by forced institutionalization under KGB supervision. They were often not even discussed among families with members suffering from various conditions. Many of the Eastern European immigrants will therefore be reluctant, still, to openly admit to feelings of depression, anxiety, acculturation stress, and other mental health challenges that are very normal among newcomer populations. Providers should be aware that these conditions may exist in their patients, and may need to approach this subject tactfully and with full confidentiality.

**Bereavement:**

For those Russian immigrants who are Orthodox, most believe that death is a necessary consequence of life, and that they will achieve eternal life in heaven if they have lived appropriately.

Orthodox religious leaders typically hold a special vigil over the deceased, called panikhida. This special contemplative time includes prayers, hymns (tropar'), chants, frequent repetition of the name of the deceased, and readings from the Gospel.

Large numbers of family members and friends will likely visit the seriously ill and deceased. They may join in special prayers for the dead, where they ask for mercy on the soul of the deceased patient.

Burial of the body is far more common than cremation. However, cremation is not prohibited. Many Russian immigrants will opt to be cremated in the United States, so that their ashes can ultimately be transported back home to Russia.

**Traditional Health Practices:**

Russians from the former Soviet Union have a long history of using traditional herbal remedies for care, which they often did in conjunction with their standard western medical treatments. Many elderly Russians continue to have a strong interest in utilizing herbal teas, alcoholic tinctures, and other methods of treating disease and promoting health. While Americans may consider this “alternative” medicine, providers should remember that these forms of traditional care were greatly respected and used by generations of Russians.

Most Russians actively practice some form of self-care, unrelated to what they are doing under the order of American physicians. For example, many younger immigrants from Russia commonly use homeopathic remedies to treat themselves. Also, many of these immigrants will bring medical kits with them from Russia that contain a variety of drugs to treat general ailments such as headaches, indigestion, bacterial infections, and the like. Most of these medicines are available over the counter in Russia, but would require prescriptions in the United States. Iowan medical providers should always respectfully seek to understand what types of self-treatment may be practiced by their Russian clients.

The main goal of health care in the former Soviet Union was usually finding the root causes of a particular disease or condition. Many Russian immigrants to the United States feel that American doctors, on the other hand, place too much emphasis on treating the disease, rather than trying to understand its causes from a more holistic standpoint. Most Russian patients will want to have active discussions with their providers about what caused their ailments.