# HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS' GUIDE

## TO ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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### INTRODUCTION

American Muslims are members one of the fastest growing and most diverse religious communities in the United States. It is very likely that most health care providers will find themselves delivering medical services to Muslim patients at one point or another during their career. Health care providers should therefore be aware of the potential need to accommodate certain traditional Islamic norms and practices surrounding gender interaction, clothing, and the nonconsumption of alcohol and pork, among other issues. The information in this guide is intended to educate health care professionals about common Muslim beliefs and practices that may assist them in the delivery of culturally competent patient care.

Of course, this document is intended as a general outline of religious practices and beliefs only. Like all groups, individual Muslim applications of these practices may vary widely. Moreover, because of the significant cultural and ethnic diversity in the global Muslim community, certain practices and customs may differ significantly, making it difficult for health care workers to generalize about Muslim practices. Health care providers should first and foremost consult and communicate with patients and families about their respective preferences or religious practices prior to and during the delivery of any medical service.

### MUSLIM VIEW OF ILLNESS AND TREATMENT

Muslims consider illness, like other life events, a test from God, and often respond with patience and prayer. Death is seen as part of every human's ultimate journey to the next life. However, the Quran urges Muslims not to have a fatalistic attitude toward life. The Prophet Muhammad taught that maintaining a healthy body is an individual's duty, and he urged Muslims to seek treatment when needed. According to one saying of the Prophet, disease is part of fate, and so is its cure. Generally, Muslims understand that the preservation of life, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and caring for the weak and sick is a collective, societal responsibility. Health care providers are seen in high esteem and often honored in Muslim cultures and communities.

### PATIENT RIGHTS

Like all patients, Muslims are entitled to safety, access, respect, appropriate communication, shared decision-making, privacy, and redress. Some Muslim patients may seek accommodations from health care providers in order to accommodate their preferred levels of religious observance.

### MUSLIM PRACTICES impacting health care include:

- Gender Interaction and Physical Contact
- Clothing and Modesty
- Dietary Guidelines, Hygiene, and Ritual Purity
- Religious Devotion and Observance

## GENDER INTERACTION AND PHYSICAL CONTACT

Many adults past the age of puberty place certain limits on interactions between members of different genders. For example, some Muslims prefer not to shake hands or hug people of different genders who are not close relatives. As an expression of modesty, some Muslims avoid prolonged eye contact with individuals of different genders who are not close relatives. Patients may ask to be treated only by a doctor, nurse, or caregiver of their same gender, particularly when physical contact is required during treatment. This should not be taken as an insult, but instead regarded as a sign of personal modesty.

Many Muslim communities subscribe to traditional sexual values and gender norms similar to those found in many other religious communities. Health care workers should approach subjects and issues such as pre-marital sex, birth control, gender identity, and sexual orientation with cultural sensitivity and understanding.

## CLOTHING AND MODESTY

Islam prescribes that both men and women behave and dress modestly. There are several ways in which Muslims express this belief.
For example: When in public, many Muslim women and girls choose to wear loose-fitting, non-revealing clothing, as well as a head covering commonly known as hijab.

- Some Muslim women may wear a face veil, commonly referred to as niqab.
- Common Muslim women's clothing includes items covering the hair, neck, and body. Many Muslim women also opt to completely cover their arms and legs, to wear long skirts rather than trousers or pants, or to wear loose-fitting robes, sometimes called abayas or chadors.
- Many men and boys also may express this principle of clothing by wearing traditional clothing, such as long robes or loose-fitting pants.

Some male Muslims wear a small head covering, called a kufi. Many Muslim men and boys choose to grow beards for religious reasons.

### CLOTHING AND MODESTY IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS INCLUDE:

In cases where disrobing is necessary, some patients may request that only providers or caregivers of the same gender be allowed in the room.

Female patients may wish to maintain their head covering even in bed. Staff may hang a "please knock" sign on their door, so that if a male needs to enter the room, a knock can give the patient the opportunity to replace her scarf or other religious covering.

## DIETARY GUIDELINES, HYGIENE, AND RITUAL PURITY

### DIETARY GUIDELINES

Muslims consider pork products and intoxicants (such as alcohol) both ritually impure and religiously prohibited. In many cases, Muslims also consider pork and alcohol derivatives such as gelatin (which is often used as a coating on pills) and some alcohol-based medicines to be prohibited. Health care providers should not be surprised if Muslim patients request alternatives to conventional treatments based on these guidelines.

**Meat Consumption Requirements:** Many Muslims only eat ritually-slaughtered meat, called halal or sometimes zabiha. Health care practitioners should be familiar with these terms in the event that they are asked to accommodate alternative meals during hospital stays. Some Muslims also eat kosher meat, the requirements of which are similar, but not identical, to halal meat or zabiha.

### HYGIENE

Islam places great emphasis on hygiene in both spiritual and physical terms. In addition to the ritual cleansing (ablutions) before prayer, Muslims also follow several other customs related to bodily hygiene, including but not limited to:

- Washing with water after urination or defecation
- Various washing procedures after contact with certain bodily fluids such as semen and, in some cases, blood
- Regular removal of armpit and pubic hair
- Keeping nostrils clean and fingernails trimmed

### RITUAL WASHING BEFORE PRAYERS

Before the daily ritual prayer, which is observed five times a day, Muslims rinse their mouth and wash their hands, face, arms and feet with water, also known as making wudu (woo-doo). Health care workers may witness Muslims "making wudu" in public bathroom sinks.

## RELIGIOUS DEVOTION AND OBSERVANCE

- **Daily Prayer:** Salat, practiced five times daily is the ritual prayer in which Muslims recite verses of the Qur'an and perform a series of prostrations and standing positions. Salat typically lasts 5-10 minutes and is performed before sunrise, early and late afternoon, at sunset, and during late evening.
- **Friday Prayer:** Jum'ah (JOO-mah), the collective prayer performed on Fridays at a set time in the early afternoon, and is obligatory for healthy adult men but optional for women.
- **Fasting:** Ramadan, the obligatory month of (intermittent) fasting in which sound-minded, healthy, and able-bodied Muslims abstain from food, drink and sexual contact from break of dawn to sunset.
- **Annual Holidays:** The two primary religious holidays observed by all Muslims around the world are Eid al-Adha, which takes place after the annual Hajj pilgrimage and Eid al-Fitr, which takes place at the end of the month of Ramadan.

### KEY TERMS AND PRONUNCIATION

**Adhan *(ath-AAN)*:** Call to prayer

**Allah *(all-lah)*:** Arabic word for God

**Eid *(EED)*:** Major religious holiday

**Halal *(Ha-LAAL)*:** Permissible by Islamic law

**Hijab *(He-JAAB)*:** Clothing Muslim women wear in public; generally loose fitting and includes a head covering

**Imam *(ee-MAAM)*:** Religious leader of a Muslim community

**Islam**: Submission to God

**Janazah *(je-NAA-zah)*:** Funeral

**Kufi *(KOO-fee)*:** Cap worn by some Muslim men

**Muslim *(mus-lim; not muz-lim)*:** One who submits to God

**Qur'an *(Kur-AAN)*:** Islam's revealed scripture, sometimes spelled Koran
**Ramadan *(RAM-a-daan)*:** The month of fasting

**Zabiha (za-bee-ha):** the method of ritually slaughtering lawful animals for human consumption; similar to Kosher

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

**Muslim Medical Associations**

- American Muslim Health Professionals (AMHP): https://amhp.us/
- Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA): https://imana.org/

**Educational Resources**

- Islamic Biomedical Ethics: Principles and Application, Abdul Aziz Sachedina, Ph.D. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys, American Library Association. https://bridgingcultures-muslimjourneys.org/