



PRIDE IN OUR DIVERSITY

The following information is provided to help you become more aware of your patients' and co-workers' views, traditions, and actions. While you can use this information as a guide, keep in mind that all people within a culture are **not** the same. Be sure to ask your patients and their families about specific beliefs, practices, and customs that may be relevant and important during medical treatment and hospitalization.

When describing the Cambodian culture the following information could apply to Cambodians visiting from Cambodia, first generations of Cambodian Americans, or ensuing generation of Cambodian Americans. Each piece of information does not necessarily apply to all Cambodian Americans.



general information

- ✓ Cambodian communities suffer greatly from the loss of family members, caused by the vicious killing in their home country.
- ✓ Cambodians began coming to Chicago in 1975 as refugees from their war-torn homeland. The communist Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979, during which period as many as 3 million (out of 7.5 million) Cambodians were killed and many others were forced to work in labor camps.
- ✓ The number of Cambodians and Cambodian-Americans in the Chicago area is estimated around 10,000 residents. Because Cambodians come here legally as refugees, the estimated number undocumented is virtually zero.
- ✓ Most refugees came here in the late 1979 and early 1980. Coming from rural areas, many of the refugees were not literate and had difficulty adjusting to life in urban America.

inter-personal relationships

relationship roles

- ✓ Traditionally, the Cambodian culture is male-oriented, and tends to remain so for a number of generations in America.
- ✓ Some male patients may be uncomfortable around female doctors or nurses.

decision-making

- ✓ Although it is important to involve the entire Cambodian family in all aspects of medical care, one might first want to ask the patient whether consulting with the family would be appropriate. This is especially true among male patients.
- ✓ Family members might want to consult with each other before taking any actions.

conflict resolution

- ✓ Cambodians are quietly assertive, but are usually obliging. Most are very rational, and do not present problems until they feel it is important to their well being.
- ✓ Religion does not usually play a role when determining what is best for a patient.
- ✓ As with many other cultures, if there is a disagreement, it may be necessary to bring in an unbiased third party, or to back up your position with a publication.

gestures

- ✓ Never raise your fingertips higher than your face.
- ✓ When passing in front of someone from Cambodia, especially an elderly or more senior person, lower your upper body slightly.
- ✓ Never place your arm over the back of a chair in which someone is sitting, or affectionately pat someone's shoulder or back as it is considered offensive.
- ✓ Patience is important; avoid showing anger in front of the patient.

important traditions

- ✓ Cambodians teach their children to value traditional clothes, dance, food and weddings; as well as ways of talking, acting and respecting one another. The young should listen to the older people in the family such as brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles.
- ✓ Traditionally in Cambodia, young people should not look at an older person's eyes when talking to them. Likewise an older person should take care of the younger ones.

treatment issues

medical treatment

- ✓ The doctor is seen as an authority figure; therefore he/she should give the family any bad news.
- ✓ Some patients can be afraid of doctors and hospitals. In these situations it may be beneficial to contact a close relative or someone that this person trusts.
- ✓ Cambodian patients value openness, and like to know the whole truth about their condition.

emotions

- ✓ Traditionally Cambodians, especially males, do not openly show their emotions.

food

- ✓ On some religious holidays Cambodians prepare food to offer to the ancestors.
- ✓ Some Cambodian delicacies include: *Num ansom* (cylinder cake), *non kaom* (sweet coconut, sticky rice cake), *samlaw misuor* (noodle soup), and sticky rice balls in banana leaves.

religion

- ✓ A majority of Cambodians adhere to Theravada branch of Buddhism (80%). The remainder includes: Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and various local religions.
- ✓ Theravada Buddhists believe that the only way to stop suffering and to gain salvation is to stop the desire which causes us to continue the illusion of the existence of individual self. By ceasing all desires and realizing the nonexistence of the self, one can find permanence and enter *nirvana* where the ego is extinguished.

death

- ✓ Death is a somber event; patients may want to have their whole family present if death is imminent.

did you know

-  About 30%-40% of adult Cambodians have become US citizens. Only 2% retain their Cambodian citizenship. However, many have returned to Cambodia to visit relatives, friends or the country itself. A few have returned there to live and work, but many send money home to help family and friends.
-  Cambodians give their children names that rhyme with the names of family members. Surnames come first in Cambodia, but most Cambodian Americans have switched the order of the first and last names to follow the custom here.

g l o s s a r y	
word	meaning
muoy	one
nah	good
khlah	some
soum	please
chup	stop
bentup	room
niyiey	speak
zy	what
aenaa	where

important holidays & dates

Event	Date	Description
New Year's Day	January 1	Marks the first day of a New Year.
Women's Day	March 8	Celebrates the contribution of women to the life of the country.
Traditional Khmer	April 13-15	Celebrates the New Year according to the New Year Southeast Asian Lunar Calendar.
Labor Day	May 1	Commemorates the contributions of the working men and women.
Constitution Day	September 24	Celebrates the ratification of the Cambodian Constitution.
Independence Day	November 9	Commemorates the regaining of Independence from French colonial rule.
UN Human Rights	December 10	Established to commemorate the basic Day human rights, so often violated during the terror years of the Khmer Rouge.
Chinese New Year	April 15 '01	



Sources

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