

6. Sikhism

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Overview FAQ

1. When, where, and how did Sikhism originate?

Sikhism was founded in the 15th century in Northern India and Pakistan by Guru Nanak Dev. The teachings of Guru Nanak and his nine successors, also called gurus, form the basis of the religion.

According to Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak went to the river to bathe and meditate one morning and remained there for three days. While meditating, he had an epiphany about the nature of God. When he returned to his village after the three days of meditation, he announced, "There is no Hindu and no Muslim," emphasizing the need for humans to transcend sectarian differences. He then began traveling the Indian and Arabian peninsulas, spreading his message of a single, omnipresent God and salvation through spiritual union with God.

Each of the ensuing nine gurus expanded on and reinforced the message of his predecessor. Their teachings became the foundation for the Sikh religion.

2. Does Sikhism have sacred texts? What are they called?

The primary sacred text of Sikhism is the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* was originally compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru in 1604, with additional text added later by the 10th Guru. The text is comprised of 5,000 hymns (*shabads*), and teaches its adherents how to live a life of peace, tranquility, and spiritual enlightenment. In Sikhism, this sacred text acts as a living, perpetual guru to guide all adherents in the absence of additional human gurus.

3. What are the core beliefs of Sikhism?

The core belief in Sikhism is faith in an infinite, formless, eternal, creator God (called *Waheguru* in Punjabi, the language of the region of India in which Sikhism began). Sikhism also places an emphasis on non-discrimination among humans, living life in an honest way, remembering God, and sharing with those in need.

Sikhism teaches that adherents must develop an intimate faith and relationship with *Waheguru*. The goal is salvation, which is achieved with one's spiritual union with *Waheguru*. Before salvation is realized, humans' souls may be continuously reincarnated and unable to unify with *Waheguru* due to the Five Evils: ego, anger, greed, attachment, and lust.

4. What are the core practices of Sikhism?

Initiated Sikhs wear five articles of faith at all times. They also serve as external symbols that Sikhs use to identify themselves. The articles, all starting with the letter “k” (commonly called the “Five Ks”) are:

1. **Keshh:** uncut hair on any part of the body, which is mandatory for both men and women; many men wear turbans (*Dastaars*) over their uncut hair;
2. **Kangha:** a small wooden comb that is carried for hygiene and maintenance of the uncut hair;
3. **Kara:** a steel bracelet that is a physical reminder that a Sikh is bound to the 10 Gurus and spiritually linked to all other Sikhs;
4. **Kachhera:** specially designed cotton underwear (resembling knee-length shorts) which reflect the dignity, modesty, and high moral character of the wearer; and
5. **Kirpan:** a small ceremonial sword resembling a dagger that is a constant reminder of the duty to seek justice and fight oppression.

Gurdwaras (“doorway to God” in Punjabi) are Sikh houses of worship. They act as community centers, teaching halls, meeting places, and the location for religious ceremonies. Each gurdwara has a kitchen (*langar*) where food is prepared and given freely to anyone, regardless of their faith.

5. What are Sikhism’s important holidays? How are they celebrated?

For a Sikh, there are no holidays in the traditional sense. Every day is to be celebrated and should be used as an opportunity to become closer to God.

In practice, many Sikhs do gather in large numbers at local gurdwaras to observe certain days during the year. These usually mark the birth or martyrdom of the 10 Gurus (called *Gurpurbs*).

The most important Gurpurbs are:

- ☞ **Vaisakhi**, the day the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created the *Khalsa Panth* (the order of initiated Sikhs) and gave Sikhs their unique communal identity;
- ☞ The **birthday of Guru Nanak**, founder of Sikhism;
- ☞ The **birthday of Guru Gobind Singh**, the 10th Guru; and
- ☞ The **martyrdom of Guru Arjan**, the fifth Guru.

6. How many adherents of Sikhism are there in the United States?**Are they located in a particular region?**

There are approximately 500,000 Sikhs residing in the United States. The highest concentrations are found in Yuba City, California; Queens, New York; Española, New Mexico; Chicago; Seattle; Detroit; and the state of Oregon.

7. What are the main sects or denominations within Sikhism?

Sikhism is a relatively young tradition and has not faced serious theological issues that would cause serious schisms. Rather, in the Sikh community, there has always been a large mainstream community with minor groups periodically emerging and then disappearing.

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Intersections with Health Care: FAQ

1. Does Sikhism have a particular view about what causes illness?**Are there illness-related rituals?**

While Sikh patients may consider their illness to be the will of Waheguru (God), the religion generally stresses that the individual must make an effort to get well, because human life is considered sacred. During times of illness, many Sikhs pray to Waheguru for their health.

Since Sikhism originated in India, some Sikhs may choose to combine Western health care with traditional medicine, including homeopathy and herbal medication.

2. Does Sikhism prescribe a particular type of dress for men or women?

Central to Sikh practice is wearing the Five Ks. All baptized men and women are required to wear their hair long and uncut (*kesh*), and to have on themselves at all times a steel bracelet (*kara*), small sword (*kirpan*), wooden comb (*kangha*), and long underpants (*kachhera*). It is extremely important that none of the Five Ks are removed from a Sikh without consent. If it is necessary to remove any of them, it is important to store them in an inoffensive place (e.g., *not* on the floor or near anyone's feet).

If hair from any part of the body must be removed, discuss this with the patient in advance. If hair is cut from the head, it should be given back to the patient for his/her own disposal.

Additionally, most Sikh men cover their hair with a turban, while women wear a long scarf (a *chuni*) over their heads and shoulders.

Both men and women may cover their bodies as much as possible during examinations and remove clothing only when necessary. If a hospital gown is required, Sikh patients should be offered one that reaches the ankles and is not open in the back. Many will feel more comfortable if allowed to wear a shawl or dressing gown over the gown while remaining in possession of the Five Ks.

3. Are there any prayer or ritual observances that are likely to occur during the patient's stay?

Many Sikhs spend a significant amount of time in meditative contemplation; this may include prayer and recitation from the *Adi Granth*. Many meditate early in the morning, in the evening, and again before sleep. Before each meditation, it is customary for Sikhs to cleanse themselves.

Some Sikhs will have a copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the hospital room. Health care providers should ask permission before touching it, and if it is granted, wear disposable gloves to handle it. The book should never be placed near feet, on the floor, or in any location that is unclean; if in doubt, speak with your patient about what this means for him/her.

Male Sikhs must remove and re-tie their turbans once a day; if they are unable to do so, assistance should be offered. The assistant should either wash his/her hands or wear disposable gloves when handling the turban.

Some Sikh patients may also wish to play holy music during the day; if the music disturbs other patients, offer headphones that do not interfere with the turban (e.g., small, in-ear headphones).

4. Does Sikhism have hygiene or washing requirements?

Cleanliness is extremely important in Sikhism. As mentioned above, many Sikhs cleanse themselves with running water before meditation. If running water is not available, the patient should be offered a bowl and jug of water.

If a Sikh patient is unable to wash, dry, or comb his/her hair, help should be offered because this is an important religious ritual that must be performed on a regular basis.

Sikhs do not cut their hair, and males do not shave their beards. If hair needs to be shaved or cut for medical purposes, approach the patient with great sensitivity and, if at all possible, discuss the need with the patient in advance. It is also important to limit the amount cut to the extent medically necessary.

5. Are there any dietary restrictions?

One of the four central taboos in Sikhism is a bar on eating meat that has been ritually slaughtered or prepared for another religion (e.g., kosher or halal meat). Some Sikhs will extend this rule to all meat and meat products, and even eggs, fish, and dairy products. Given the different stringency with which these rules are observed, each patient should be consulted. However, vegetarian food is always a safe option.

It is common for Sikhs to have friends and family who visit and bring food from the *langar* (the kitchen inside Sikh places of worship). Eating *langar* food can be very comforting and should be allowed unless there are medical restrictions.

6. Are there any medications, treatments, or procedures that Sikhs cannot accept?

Many Sikhs avoid consuming anything that they believe will cause either temporary or permanent damage to their bodies. This includes tobacco, alcohol, and all narcotic or intoxicating drugs. However, most Sikhs will take medication that contains traces of alcohol or narcotics as long as the intention is not intoxication; the individual patient should be consulted when this is required.

Some Sikhs, particularly the elderly, may be reluctant to take pain medication because they believe there are lessons to be learned from pain and suffering.

Medication that contains any pork or beef products is generally impermissible.

7. Can Sikh patients see providers of the opposite sex?

There are no religious rules or restrictions that prohibit Sikh patients from seeing providers of the opposite sex, even with OB/Gyn physicians or staff.

8. Can Sikhs donate organs or accept donor organs?

Receiving and giving organs is accepted by the majority of Sikhs; they believe that the body is simply flesh, while it is the soul that is eternal.

9. Should I consult anyone other than the patient when seeking informed consent or other patient decisions?

Generally, Sikh families expect to be involved with the health care decisions of relatives. Some Sikhs, particularly the elderly, may refuse treatment if the family has not given its consent. Providers should discuss this with patients and learn which family members should be consulted.

10. What is Sikhism's view on reproductive health and family planning?**Are contraceptives okay? What about abortion? Voluntary sterilization?**

Contraception is generally permissible for married couples as long as the couple remains mindful that the central reason for sex is creation of new life.

Infertility treatments are generally acceptable for married couples, but providers should discuss how any unused embryos from in vitro fertilization treatments will be handled.

Abortion is considered impermissible by most Sikhs, although it is deemed acceptable by most if the mother's life is in danger.

Voluntary sterilization is frowned upon by many Sikhs, because children are considered the wealth of Sikh families. If sterilization is being discussed with a married woman, the majority of Sikh husbands will want to be included in the conversation.

11. Are there particular beliefs or rituals concerning pregnancy and birth?**What about postpartum women? What about women who have miscarried?**

Traditionally, Sikh women do not leave their homes for 40 days after giving birth. If possible, postnatal appointments should be conducted via home visit. Some Sikh women will not want to bathe for the first few days after birth, believing that they are susceptible to chills and backaches.

A Sikh mother may be uncomfortable if her child is removed from her hospital room to a nursery or NICU. If it is necessary to separate mother and child, the reasons should be clearly explained.

Sikh babies are often not given an official name until the family visits their gurdwara for a naming ceremony. Medical records will need to be updated after the ceremony.

If a Sikh woman miscarries, the fetal remains should be wrapped in a clean, white cloth and given to the family for burial or cremation in accordance with local laws. It is important that the health care provider *not* cut a lock of hair from the child, as this is strictly forbidden.

12. Are there important end-of-life rituals or beliefs?

Most Sikhs will be visited by a *granthi*, a ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib, who reads from the scriptures and prays with the patient. Family members may also bring holy water from the Ganges River (*gangajal*).

It is customary for a large number of relatives and close friends to visit, since visiting the sick is a Sikh duty. If possible, provide a space to accommodate the visitors. Visitors may wish to place written hymns or prayers beside the patient. After a Sikh has passed away, loved ones may recite sacred hymns together.

Sikhism teaches that the soul has departed and the flesh is empty when neither the heartbeat nor breathing can be restored; most Sikhs accept brain death as the departure of the soul from the body, and believe that attempts at resuscitation should not be taken to extremes. Once there has been a determination of death, the empty flesh left behind is not considered sacred. However, the body should be treated with great respect out of deference to and support of the family.

13. What should be done with the body after death?

Health care providers who come into contact with the body should wear disposable gloves, cover any open wounds, close the eyes and mouth, and straighten the arms and legs. If possible, the body should *not* be washed, as this is believed to be the family's duty. Additionally, it is extremely important that the Five Ks not be removed, including any hair or a male Sikh's turban. The body should be wrapped in a clean, white cloth. It is preferable that these procedures are done by a health care provider of the same sex as the patient.

Most Sikhs will not object to a postmortem. However, the family should be warned if it will require that the body be kept for several days, as funerals traditionally take place before sunset on the day following death and some Sikhs in mourning fast until after the funeral.

If the family requests to see the body, care should be taken to ensure that the viewing room is free of all religious symbols.

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Sikhism: Intersections with Health Care

For its adherents, Sikhism is more a way of life than a set of religious tenets. One of its central ideals is that all life is to be preserved, so it tends to adapt easily to innovations in technology and health care that serve this end. Many Sikhs will gladly accept technological advances such as procedures for infertility treatment, organ donation, and genetic engineering—although many will reject procedures that they believe go against the principle of preservation of life, such as terminating a pregnancy.

Quick answers for many questions that arise when caring for a Sikh patient may be found in the FAQ. For more in-depth explanations, consult the appropriate section below.

CAUSES OF ILLNESS & HEALING RITUALS

As mentioned above, Sikhism teaches that protecting human life is a religious requirement; human life is viewed as a gift from the divine and is the highest form of all life. When life ends, the soul returns to the divine.

Many Sikhs believe that illness is the will of Wehaguru (God). However, there is a fine balance struck between the will of Wehaguru to give and take life, and the responsibility to preserve one's own health. Generally, individual Sikhs accept that the state of one's health is ultimately in the hands of Wehaguru, but that it is the individual's religious duty to do whatever s/he can to preserve the sanctity of his/her own life.

When illness strikes, Sikhs pray to Wehaguru for help, either alone or with trusted friends and family. Some also recite from Sikhism's sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib, which is believed to provide physical and spiritual strength and nourishment. Some Sikh patients may ask that sacred music (called *keertan*) be played.

Because Sikhism originated in India, some Sikhs may choose to combine Western health care with alternative medicine, including homeopathy, naturopathy, and herbal medications. Some also rely on Ayurveda, a medical system developed on the Indian subcontinent that relies on the medicinal properties of natural substances (herbs, minerals, metals, fruits and vegetables, and animals) and on the physiological effects of certain foods and flavors.

INFORMED CONSENT & PATIENT DECISION MAKING

Given the importance Sikhism places on providing care for relatives, many Sikhs will expect their families to be involved in health care decisions. Some Sikhs, particularly the elderly, may refuse treatment if the family has not given its consent. Most Sikhs, regardless of age, will feel more comfortable making a decision with family input. Thus, it is usually important for the health care provider to involve the family.

GENDER & MODESTY

There are no religious rules or restrictions that prohibit Sikh patients from seeing providers of the opposite sex, even with OB/Gyn physicians or staff. However, culturally, some Sikhs may feel inhibited when discussing various aspects of their health, especially sexual matters. If this is the case, patients should be seen by a provider of the same sex. If a facility cannot accommodate this, younger Sikhs, both male and female, may feel more comfortable if accompanied by a family member. However, this is strictly a matter of modesty rather than a religious teaching.

DRESS & MODESTY

Baptized Sikhs (called *khalsa* Sikhs) wear five items of faith, called the Five Ks, at all times. They serve not only as external symbols Sikhs use to identify one another, but also as articles of faith. Wearing the Five Ks is intended as a display of the Sikh's integrity. Indeed, Sikhism teaches that observing this ritual helps adherents "keep the God-given form intact." (*Adi Granth* 1084) Young children and even infants may wear one or more of the Five Ks.

The Five Ks are:

1. **Kesh:** uncut hair on any part of the body, which is mandatory for both men and women; many men wear turbans (Dastaars) to protect their hair;
2. **Kangha:** a small wooden comb for hygiene and maintenance of the uncut hair;
3. **Kara:** a steel bracelet that is a physical reminder that Sikhs are bound to the Gurus and to all other Sikhs;
4. **Kachhera:** specifically designed cotton underwear (resembling knee-length shorts) which reflect the dignity, modesty, and high moral character of the wearer; and
5. **Kirpan:** a short, ceremonial iron blade worn to show one's commitment to defending one's faith and protecting the weak, two of a Sikh's baptismal duties. The kirpan is purely ceremonial and is never actually used as a blade.

Most Sikh patients will want to retain these items on their persons as long as possible. If *any* of the articles are removed without patient consent, the patient may well feel as though s/he has been severely insulted and that his/her religious identity has been stripped away. Thus, it is extremely important that patient consent be sought any time a health care provider wants or needs to remove—or even handle—one of these items. Before removing or handling the Five Ks, it is also important to discuss how the articles of faith will be treated once removed.

Staff should reassure the patient that the items will be handled with the greatest respect. The articles should be placed only in inoffensive places (e.g., not on the floor, near anyone's feet, or tossed in a bag with the patient's dirty laundry or other possessions). Sikhism teaches that the Five Ks are to receive the same amount of respect as is shown to copies of the Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhism's primary sacred text, which are kept in gurdwaras on thrones and are covered with richly decorated cloths to keep them clean.

The first article of faith, kesh (uncut hair), may prove an extra challenge for health care providers. Sikhism teaches that keeping one's hair long and uncut confirms belief in the acceptance of God's will. Thus, if hair must be removed from any part of the body for a medical procedure, the patient should be advised as far in advance as possible so s/he can get accustomed to the idea.

If hair must be removed, there are ways to try and reduce the trauma. Most importantly, providers should remove the minimum amount that is medically necessary for a given procedure. When hair is removed from the head, it should be given back to the patient for disposal. If hair must be removed from the body, there is also a specific prohibition against razors and scissors; should a patient adamantly reject the use of these implements, a depilatory cream might be an acceptable compromise.

Other than the Five Ks and their associated requirements, Sikh dress varies enormously. Traditional dress are long, loose trousers and a long-sleeved jacket for men, and a pair of long trousers and overdress for women (called a *salwar-Kameez*), but there are no actual guidelines requiring a particular style of dress or garment. Many Sikhs in the United States — especially younger adherents — wear Western-style clothing.

Additionally, many Sikh men cover their hair with a turban, while women wear a long scarf (called a *chuni*) over their heads and shoulders. If these need to be removed, patients should be offered another head covering, if possible. As a religious observance, many men re-tie their turbans every day. If assistance is needed, the provider should either wash his/her hands or put on disposable gloves before touching the turban.

Although there is no specified dress, there is still a concern for modesty. Both men and women may choose to cover their bodies as much as possible during examinations and remove clothing only if needed. If a hospital gown is necessary, Sikh patients should be offered one that reaches the ankles and is not open in the back; many will feel more comfortable if they're allowed to wear a shawl or dressing gown.

PRAYER & RITUAL OBSERVANCES

Sikhs spend a significant amount of time in meditative contemplation; prayer and meditation are the cornerstones of Sikhism and the main practices that Sikhs employ in striving to become closer to *Wehaguru*. Sikhs customarily pray three times during the day—in the morning, early evening, and before bed—and staff should avoid interrupting these prayers for routine matters like taking a patient's blood pressure or temperature whenever possible. Staff can ask patients about their prayer practices and the time of day they pray upon admission and schedule routine testing accordingly.

Although prayer is a highly individualized ritual, there are some aspects of its practice with which patients may require assistance. For example, many Sikhs wash before prayer. Running water is preferred for this ritual cleansing; patients with limited mobility may use a bowl of water. For some prayers, a Sikh may choose to stand while praying. Again, those with limited mobility may require some assistance or modifications to their normal routine.

Meditative time includes prayer and recitation from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Sikhs are likely to have a copy of the text with them in the hospital, and it is considered insulting if the text is not handled with the utmost respect. As noted above, copies of the *Guru Granth Sahib* housed in gurdwaras are kept on thrones and covered with decorative cloth. Providers should ask permission before touching the text, and, if permission is granted, wear disposable gloves. The book should never be placed near feet, on the floor, or in any unclean location.

Sikh patients may also play tapes of holy music during the day. *Keertan* are sacred songs based on passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib*; every verse of the text has an accompanying melody. Listening to *keertan* is likely to comfort the patient. However, if it disturbs others, the patient should be offered a pair of headphones that do not interfere with his/her head scarf or turban.

It may be difficult for a Sikh patient who is hospitalized for an extended period of time to be separated from his/her community. One of the guidelines for living a disciplined Sikh life (along with prayer and meditation) is taking an active role in the safety and well-being of the community and of others generally. Many Sikhs volunteer

in their local gurdwara or community center, or do other community service work not specifically related to their gurdwara.

During a prolonged hospital stay, it may become important to help the patient maintain his/her connection to the larger community. The patient's community will most likely help this process along by performing another Sikh duty, visiting the sick, and bringing food from the langar (the gurdwara's kitchen). Some of this food may be high in fat or sugar, requiring a conversation with the patient and family if the patient has hospital-imposed dietary restrictions.

HYGIENE & WASHING REQUIREMENTS

Sikhism teaches that physical cleanliness is necessary for spiritual cleanliness. The second article of faith, the kangha (comb), symbolizes the importance of keeping oneself physically and spiritually uncontaminated. Most Sikhs prefer to use running water for washing.

In addition to wearing the kangha, Sikhs maintain their hygiene through frequent cleansing with running water; many hospitalized Sikh patients will want to take a shower or bath every day. If the patient's health does not allow him/her to take a bath or use a sink, s/he should be offered a bowl and jug of water. Many Sikhs also wash their faces and hands before prayer or meditation, after eating, and after using the toilet. Before meditation, patients may also wish to change into clean clothes, if clothing has been soiled.

Given that uncut hair, kesh, is an article of faith and that Sikhism emphasizes cleanliness, Sikhs will wish to wash (with shampoo and conditioner) and dry their hair on a regular basis; at a minimum, most will want to brush their hair daily. Many Sikh men will treat facial hair the same way. Hair may be left to dry naturally or with an electric hairdryer. If the patient's health makes this difficult, assistance should be offered for this religious ritual. After washing or brushing, Sikh men will need to re-tie their turbans, for which they may also require assistance.

DIETARY REQUIREMENTS

One of the four founding taboos in Sikhism is not to eat beef, pork, or any meat that has been ritually slaughtered or prepared for people of another religion (e.g., kosher or halal meats). The prohibition on kosher meat stems from a larger belief in avoiding unnecessary rituals; the prohibition on halal meat comes from the commandment that only meat from animals killed quickly with a single blow (*jhakta* meat) is acceptable. Since halal requires allowing the blood to drain slowly from the animal, animals killed in this way are unacceptable.

However, while the Guru Granth Sahib seems to indicate that the prohibition on meat extends *only* to meat that has been ritually prepared for another tradition, there are wide variations in how individual adherents interpret this text. Some Sikhs will extend this rule to cover all meat and meat products, and even eggs, fish, and dairy; others will eat any meat as long as it is *jhakta* and is not beef or pork. Given the different stringency with which this prohibition is interpreted and observed, each patient should be consulted as to his/her individual practices.

Friends and family may also bring hospitalized patients food from the langar of the local gurdwara. This food, which is given freely to those in need, is always vegetarian so that people of any caste, culture, tradition, or religious background can consume it.

Langar food is often a good option, as it both allows patients to maintain links to their communities *and* to continue eating their usual foods. However, if langar food is not a feasible option (either because the patient is on a medically restricted diet or because of a hospital policy against outside food), and the patient's views on eating meat are not clear, vegetarian food is always a safe option.

In addition to prohibitions around certain foods, Sikhism also prohibits consumption of anything that is believed to do either temporary or permanent damage to one's body. In Sikhism, the ultimate goal is to discover the divine spark within one's self. Because the physical body is the container for this divinity, Sikhs are enjoined from harming their bodies. Prohibitions are specifically enumerated in the Guru Granth Sahib and include tobacco, alcohol, and all narcotic or intoxicating drugs. The consequences for consumption of these substances can be severe; traditionally, a baptized Sikh who violated these rules was made to repent in front of his/her community *and* had to be re-baptized into the Sikh faith.

Unlike many other religious traditions, fasting is not a religious mandate for Sikhs; it was not specifically mentioned by any of the Gurus or by the Guru Granth Sahib. Some Sikhs may still choose to fast during certain holidays or when there is a full moon as a way of helping focus the mind. However, there is no requirement to do so.

MEDICATION, TREATMENT, OR PROCEDURE RESTRICTIONS

In general, there are no religious prohibitions on any medications in Sikhism; most Sikhs will even take medication that contains alcohol or narcotics as long as the intention is to heal, and not to become intoxicated.

Leniency is less likely to be given for medication that does not meet Sikh dietary requirements. Many Sikhs, who observe restrictions on eating meats (see Dietary Requirements), will not want to accept medication that contains either beef or pork byproducts, as there is no way to guarantee that the animals used in its production were killed in accordance with jhakta requirements; as a general rule, vegetarian medication should be offered if it is available. If there are no treatment options that meet Sikh dietary requirements, this should be clearly explained and discussed with the patient.

Some Sikhs, particularly the elderly, may be reluctant to take pain medication due to a belief that the acceptance of suffering and pain is a spiritual virtue. Since this is a complex, personal struggle with one's faith, it may be helpful to bring in a Sikh leader or chaplain to discuss the patient's concerns.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING

When Sikhs marry, it is believed that the two individual souls of the spouses become spiritually united. Thus, marriage is thought of as a semi-holy state and elevates the partners' spiritual states; as such, it is strongly encouraged.

Most Sikhs, particularly those from older generations, discourage all sexual relations outside of marriage, believing that it is immoral.

Sikhism also teaches that lust (*kam*) is one of the five major sins. In general, sexual activity should be restricted to procreative sex between married partners. When an unmarried Sikh seeks medical attention for an issue related to sexual activity, s/he may be uncomfortable and will appreciate extra sensitivity, especially if the patient is

a minor or is accompanied by family members who may be unaware of his/her sexual activity.

There are times when sexual activity is not considered sinful, even if it is not a procreative act, making contraception permissible. Non-procreative sex between married couples is generally acceptable as long as they remain mindful of the central reason for sex: creating new life. However, contraception for unmarried couples or those engaging in extramarital relations is never permissible, and non-married patients may be hesitant to talk about this aspect of their lives.

Though contraception for married couples is allowed, voluntary sterilization (either for men or women) is often frowned upon because children are considered the wealth of the family. If a provider is discussing sterilization, either voluntary or involuntary, with a married Sikh female, almost all Sikh husbands will want to be included in the discussion.

As there is great emphasis placed on bearing children, Sikhism allows infertility treatments within the context of marriage. However, providers should discuss in advance how any unused embryos following successful in vitro fertilization treatments will be handled, as this is an unresolved issue.

Sikhism teaches that terminating a pregnancy is forbidden, although some younger Sikhs believe that this structure is tempered if the mother's life is in danger. Disposal of unused embryos after in vitro fertilization treatments is an unresolved issue, and will require a conversation with the patients.

Hysterectomies must be discussed with extra care. Most Sikh women are from Southeast Asian backgrounds. They are likely to feel that they are failing to meet both a cultural and religious standard, and may also face family pressure against the procedure. If a hysterectomy is medically inevitable, counseling (either religious or secular) may be required to help the patient come to terms with her medical condition, and it may be important to involve her spouse.

PREGNANCY & BIRTH

Birth is an occasion for great celebration in the Sikh tradition, as new children are seen as the cultural wealth of a family and the consummation of a married couple's spiritual union. New parents are likely to receive a large number of visitors. Relatives may bring a bracelet (kara) for the infant, which should not be removed without parental consent.

Observant Sikh women giving birth will most likely want to remain in possession of all Five Ks. Unless this poses a health threat, it should be allowed. Some very devout Sikh women will not want to remove their kachhera (underwear), even during birth. If it becomes an obstacle to care and the provider seeks its removal, women may choose to leave one leg or an ankle in the kachhera as a compromise.

Sikh mothers very rarely let their new children out of their sight; thus, many will be uncomfortable if the baby is removed from the mother's room to a nursery or NICU. If this practice is necessary in a particular facility, the health care provider should take time to explain to the mother the reason behind the removal.

Traditionally, Sikh women do not leave their homes for 40 days after giving birth. It is believed that new mothers need this time to rest and are in a vulnerable state; baths in particular are believed to cause chills, and women may also feel vulnerable to backaches or fevers. During this period, female relatives and members of the faith

community visit frequently to ensure that all the mother's and household's needs are being met. If possible, postnatal appointments should be done in the home during the first 40 days.

Once the mother and child are able to travel, the family usually visits their gurdwara for a naming ceremony and celebration of the birth. During this ceremony, the Guru Granth Sahib is opened to a random spot. The first letter of the first word on the left-hand page is used as the first letter of the child's name. If the baby is a boy, *Singh* (meaning "lion") will also be added as a surname; for a baby girl, *Kaur* (meaning "princess") will be added. Once the official name is chosen, medical records will need to be updated.

If a woman miscarries, the child's body (or the birth products, depending on the stage of pregnancy when the miscarriage occurred) should be wrapped in a clean cloth and given to the family for proper washing, burial, or cremation, in accordance with local law. Washing in particular is seen as the family's duty. In addition, providers should not cut a lock of hair from the child, as it is religiously forbidden to cut hair even at this early stage.

ORGAN DONATION

Organ donation is generally permissible in Sikhism, based on two religious beliefs.

First, Sikhism teaches that saving a human life is one of the greatest things a person can do. Second, Sikhism teaches that while the soul is eternal, the body is only its perishable shell and is no longer sacred once the spark of life is gone. Thus, if another person can be helped through use of the "shell," organ donation is a positive act.

Personal objections or discomfort with organ donations may override these religious principles, however, so each patient and his/her family should be consulted.

END OF LIFE

It is customary for a large number of relatives and close friends to visit if death is imminent, because visiting the sick is a Sikh duty. Family will expect to be closely involved in end-of-life treatment and decisions, although the patient retains the final say. If the hospital staff is overwhelmed by a large number of visitors, the facility may ask the family to designate one or two close relatives who are allowed to visit, especially in sensitive hospital areas like the ICU. Relatives may also be asked to limit the number visiting and then rotate and take turns.

Most severely ill Sikhs will be visited by a *granthi*, a ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib. The *granthi* will read from the scripture and pray with the patient to spiritually prepare him/her for death. Visitors may wish to place written hymns or prayers beside the patient. Traditionally, Sikhs wish to die with the name of Wehaguru whispered in their ears.

As in most religions, the topic of when it is one's divinely determined time for death versus the obligation to provide medical intervention to prolong life is a very sensitive one. For Sikhs, there are two sets of competing interests.

First, there is the Sikh belief that human life is a gift from Waheguru. Sikhism teaches that destroying that gift condemns the deceased to heavy penance upon reincarnation. Second, although it is generally taught that every effort must be made to preserve life, Sikhs believe that the dying adherent rejoins God before reincarnation.

Thus, preserving life in a vegetative state may be seen as unnecessarily keeping the patient separated from the divine.

As a result, discussions regarding the termination of life support, Do Not Resuscitate orders or whether or not to pursue extraordinary measures are likely to be sensitive. If a patient or family is struggling with these difficult issues, it is wise to bring in the counsel of a Sikh religious leader or chaplain, who can respond to the questions and concerns of the patient.

Sikhism teaches that the soul has departed and the flesh is empty when neither the heartbeat nor breathing can be restored; most Sikhs accept brain death as the departure of the soul from the body, and believe that attempts at resuscitation should not be taken to extremes. Once there has been a determination of death, the empty flesh left behind is not considered sacred. However, the body should be treated with great respect out of deference to and support of the family.

All health care staff should wear disposable gloves when touching the body; if possible, the person handling the body should be of the same sex as the deceased. All open wounds should be covered, the eyes and mouth closed, and the arms and legs straightened. The body should not be undressed, and should be wrapped in a clean, white cloth. It is extremely important that the Five Ks not be removed, including any hair from the patient or a male Sikh's turban.

Cleansing the body is a religious ritual for Sikhs; many families will wish to do this themselves and feel very uncomfortable if the body is washed by hospital staff. The family might ask to prepare the body in the hospital, and facilities should be made available if possible. If this cannot be accommodated, the reasons why should be clearly explained to the deceased's family and attempts at compromise made.

Most Sikhs will not object to a postmortem, if it is recommended. However, the family should be warned if it will require that the body be kept for several days. Sikh funerals traditionally take place before sunset on the day following the death. Since some Sikhs in mourning will not eat until after the funeral, the process should be made as expedient as possible. If the family requests to see the body before it is removed from the hospital, care should be taken to ensure that the room where it is viewed is free of all religious symbols.

FOR MORE READING: SIKHISM

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