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Intersections with Health Care: FAQ

1. Does Buddhism have a particular view about what causes illness?

Are there illness-related rituals?

Most Buddhists believe that illness is caused by one's past negative actions; as such, illness is also an opportunity to clear past debts. Many believe in holistic medicine and may prefer to use traditional herbal remedies and avoid Western medicine. Some sects of Buddhism also blame illness on malevolent spirits, requiring exorcism by a Buddhist master.

Many Buddhists will pray and perform rituals to the Medicine Buddha, a manifestation of the Buddha that promotes healing. Others may recite purification prayers, or try to create favorable circumstances for healing by engaging in virtuous deeds.

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

Ordained monks and nuns wear thin cotton robes of a specific hue according to their traditions; common colors include maroon, white, and orange. Lay Buddhists often dress modestly and may not be comfortable wearing shorts or revealing shirts.

Depending on the Buddhist denomination, believers may wear blessed cords or amulets around their necks or wrists. These items should not be removed without the patient's consent; if removal is necessary, they should be kept clean and safe.

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

Prayer and meditation are core practices for almost all Buddhists. Depending on individual and denominational beliefs, these practices may occur throughout the day, with early morning being the most common time. Patients may prefer to meditate on the floor; some may also wish to sleep on the floor. Offer privacy and quiet during meditation; if possible, a side room should be made available.

Any scriptures in the room should be treated with great respect. Objects should not be placed on them, nor should they ever be placed on the floor.

Many Buddhists will choose to have an image of a Buddha in the room. This should not be touched without the patient's consent. Additionally, the patient may wish to have flowers or incense near the image. You may need to discuss these practices with the patient if, for example, incense is not allowed.

4. Does Buddhism have hygiene or washing requirements?

Most Buddhists wash their hands in running water before meditation. If access to running water is not an option, they should be provided with a jug or bowl.

5. Are there any dietary restrictions?

Many Buddhists are strict vegetarians and abstain from drinking alcohol or ingesting anything believed to dull the senses. However, the individual patient should be asked because there are no strict, universally observed dietary rules.