



A HEALTH CARE  
PROVIDER'S  
GUIDE TO ISLAMIC  
RELIGIOUS PRACTICES



**CAIR**

Council on American-Islamic Relations

**The Council on American-Islamic Relations** is a non-profit, membership organization dedicated to presenting an Islamic perspective on public issues.

**CAIR Research Center** conducts research on the American Muslim experience. The center can be reached at: [researchacair-net.org](http://researchacair-net.org).

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*"There is a cure for every disease. Whenever an illness is treated with its right remedy, it will, by Allah's permission, be cured."*

Saying of Prophet Muhammad

## **Glossary of Muslim Terms**

<i>Adhan</i>	Call to prayer.
<i>Allah</i>	God.
<i>Eid</i>	A day of festivity and major religious holiday.
<i>Halal</i>	Permissible by Islamic law.
<i>Hijab</i>	Clothing Muslim women wear in public. It is generally loose-fitting and includes a head covering. Also called khimar.
<i>Imam</i>	Prayer leader.
<i>Janazah</i>	Funeral.
<i>Jum'ah</i>	Friday (prayer).
<i>Kufi</i>	A cap worn by some Muslim men.
<i>Qur'an</i>	Islam's scripture.
<i>Ramadan</i>	The month of fasting.
<i>Shari'a</i>	Islamic law.
<i>Tayammum</i>	Symbolic cleansing before prayer that does not require water.
<i>Wudu</i>	Ablution, or ritual washing before prayer.

**A**ccording to demographers, Islam is the world's second largest faith, with more than a billion adherents. Muslims are a dynamic segment of the American population. This multi-ethnic, rapidly growing group adds a new factor in the increasingly diverse character of patients in the health care system. The information in this booklet is designed to assist health care providers in formulating and implementing policies and procedures aimed at the delivery of a more culturally competent care. It will also serve as a guide for the accommodation of religiously mandated practices of Muslim patients.

## **Muslim View of Illness and Treatment**

Muslims receive illness with patience and prayers and consider it, like other life events, a test from God. Death is part of every human's ultimate journey to the next life. Yet the Quran admonishes those with a fatalistic attitude towards life. The Prophet Muhammad taught that maintaining a healthy body is an individual's duty and urged Muslims to seek treatment whenever needed. According to one saying of the Prophet, disease is part of fate, and so is its cure. There is a consensus among Muslim jurists that preserving life is the supreme objective of Shari'a, or Islamic law. Caring for the sick and the weak is a collective, societal responsibility.

## **U.S. Legal Protections of Religious Freedom**

Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, religious celebrations, and dietary and clothing requirements are long standing practices of members of the Muslim faith. Such religiously mandated expressions are protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which protects the freedom to practice one's religion. Federal and state laws prohibit discriminatory practices on the basis of sex, race, religion, and national origin. Although religious practices of different faith traditions may have common elements, the details which define what is proper religious practice may differ from one religion to another.

### **Daily Prayer**

Islam urges "God consciousness" in the individual's life. To that end, Islam prescribes that believers perform prayer five times each day. Each prayer takes five to ten minutes offered any time during the following periods:

1. Daybreak until just before sunrise.
2. Midday until afternoon.
3. Late afternoon until just before sun set.
4. Sunset until darkness.
5. From darkness until midnight.

Hospitalized patients and individuals in nursing homes may ask to be alerted in order to fulfill this religious duty on time. During the act of worship, which include

specific recitations from the Qur'an, the Muslim will stand, bow and touch the forehead to the ground. Patients who cannot stand or kneel may pray using head motions (or even eye motions, should the condition require) in their beds. Patients may bring to the hospital a Quran and prayer rug. As an expression of respect, Muslims do not place anything on top of the Quran.

## **Washing**

Before prayer, Muslims wash their face, hands and feet with water. This washing is performed as needed and called wudu, or ablution. In hospitals and nursing homes some patients may need assistance in washing. They will be grateful if their nurse knows of this need. The washing is normally performed in a rest room sink or other facility that has running water, and takes about two minutes. It may take a little longer for some patients, depending on their mobility. Patients with no mobility may carry out tayammum, or symbolic ablution, if there is no one available to wash them. Also, taya mum can apply to areas of the body that, for medical reasons, cannot come in contact with water (casts, bandages, etc.).

## **Prayer Space**

Worship may be performed in any quiet, dry, clean place. During the prayers, the worshiper will face toward Mecca

(generally northeast in America, except in Hawaii and western Alaska where Muslims face northwest). Total privacy is not required. However, others should not walk in front of or interrupt the worshiper during the prayer. He or she may not respond to a ringing telephone or conversation. Doctors and nurses should wait to address the patient until the the end of the prayer. However, in case of emergency, the Muslim will respond to an announcement by stopping the prayer immediately.

Relatives and friends visiting patients around evening prayer time would appreciate it if health care providers inform them about the nearest chapel where they can offer their prayer. Chapels that can accommodate Muslim needs must have adequate space. Also, they must be clear of images of living creatures. Muslim worshippers stand in line, bow and touch the forehead to the ground.

## **Friday Congregational Prayer**

Friday is the day for congregational worship in Islam, called Jum'ah. It lasts about forty-five to ninety minutes and takes place at the mosque (a house of worship) during the noontime prayer and includes a sermon. Sick people do not have to attend the congregational prayer. However, seniors in nursing homes would appreciate any assistance in traveling to the nearest mosque. Mosque administrators may be willing to help arrange the transportation and accommodation of dis-

abled persons wishing to attend mosque services.

## **Fasting**

Islamic holy days and festivals follow the lunar calendar. Like the solar calendar, it has twelve months. However, a lunar month, which is marked by the rise of a new crescent on the horizon, may last only twenty-nine days. Thus a lunar year is about eleven days shorter than the solar year, causing the Islamic holy days to move forward about eleven days each year.

The month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the time in which Muslims are to fast. Observing Ramadan means refraining from eating, drinking (and smoking) and sexual activity from dawn to sunset. Ramadan is a period of personal restraint and a time of focus on proper conduct. It is also time to empathize with those who are less fortunate and to appreciate what one has.

Fasting is prescribed for those who are mentally and physically fit. Those exempted from fasting include children under the age of puberty, those who are too old to fast, nursing mothers, pregnant women, those who are menstruating, and the sick.

Sick persons can defer fasting and make up the missed days at a later time. Emergency medical care can be given without reservation. In non-emergency sit-

uations, fasting Muslims will usually agree to medical testing but not to nutritional intravenous injection. Still, the observance of the fast may require the postponement of some medical procedures. Medical tests and drugs can be administered after sundown or after the Ramadan fast ends if possible. Fasting Muslims can have drops put in the eyes or ears. These decisions must be made by the patient in consultation with his/her doctor.

## **Muslim Holidays**

There are several days in the Muslim calendar with special religious significance. However, Muslims celebrate Eid (a day of festivity and major religious holiday) twice a year. The first is celebrated on the three days after the month of Ramadan ends. The second is celebrated on the tenth through the thirteenth days of the twelfth Islamic month. The feasts include congregational prayer, family visitations and gift exchanges. A typical greeting on these occasions is "Eid Mubarak," or Blessed Eid (pronounced "eed moo-BAR-ak). Eid days are devoted exclusively to family and community. Elective medical tests and procedures should be scheduled around the holidays. Hospital administrators should add Muslim holidays to their calendars. Local Islamic centers would be able to furnish such information in a timely manner.

## Dietary Requirements

The Qur'an prohibits the consumption of alcohol and pork. Therefore, practicing Muslims are careful about the food they consume and how it is prepared. Muslims follow certain standards—called halal (permissible)—of slaughter and preparation of meat and poultry. Some objectionable food items include:

- Pepperoni, sausage, and hot dogs containing pork.
- Bacon—alone or in soups, quiche, etc.
- Animal shortening—in breads, pudding, cookies, cakes, donuts, etc. Vegetable shortening is acceptable.
- Gelatin—in Jello, desserts, candies, marshmallows, chocolates, etc.
- Lard—in any product.
- Food ingredients containing alcohol, such as vanilla extract and Dijon mustard.

Health care centers can order Muslim special meals from certified halal food providers. If this is not possible, patients must be given choices that meet Muslim dietary requirement (such as vegetable, egg, milk and fish). Some patients may object to fish without scales, for instance, catfish.

Physicians should avoid prescribing medical pills coated with pork-extracted gelatin. Also, some types of medications, such as cough syrups, often contain alcohol. If available, alternatives to these medications should be prescribed. For

instance, the pediatric formulations of most cough syrups do not contain alcohol and can be given to adult patients after the dose is adjusted.

## **Clothing**

Islam prescribes that both men and women behave and dress modestly. Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their wisdom, skills and contribution to the community, rather than for their physical attributes. There are a number of ways in which Muslim men and women express such teachings.

Men and boys are always to be covered from the navel to the knee. Also, some Muslim men wear a small head covering, called a kufi. When in public, many Muslim women wear loose-fitting, non-revealing clothing, known as hijab, or khimar. This attire, which may vary in style, includes a head covering. Female patients may wish to maintain this head covering throughout hospitalization (even in bed), or may ask staff to hang a "Please knock sign on the door so they may cover their heads before a non-relative enters the room.

Doctors and nurses should not demand the removal of any piece of clothing unless there is a clear need for it. Also, if possible, males—except the husband—should not be allowed in the room.

## **Touching**

For those who have reached puberty, Islam prescribes certain parameters for relations between the sexes. For example, many Muslims are reluctant to shake hands with the opposite sex. This should not be taken as an insult, but as a sign of personal modesty. Patients may ask for a same sex nurse and doctor.

## **Birth and Circumcision**

Following Prophetic tradition, Muslim parents whisper the adhan (call to prayer) close to the right ear of a newly born baby. This ensures that among the first words a Muslim infant hears is an invitation to follow God. Circumcision is required only of male babies and usually takes place within the first seven days of life. Should there be any medical reason, it can be performed during later childhood years.

## **Death**

It is essential that family members (or the local mosque if family members cannot be reached) know immediately when a patient is dying. Many would like to be present during the last days to hold special prayers with the person. If family can not come soon, the imam (prayer leader) on call can counsel the patient.

In accordance with Islamic tradition, family or community members wash the body of the dead and bury him/her quickly. Cremation is not permissible and

embalming should not be performed unless required by law. The imam on call or the local mosque must be notified immediately to accommodate Janaza (funeral) service. Patients may have in their will requests specifying where they should be buried and who should handle their funeral and burial. Such requests should be accommodated. Hospital staff may ask about such a will and may encourage patients to put all their requests in writing.

## **On Call Chaplains**

Hospitals should designate imams, or Muslim chaplains, to serve their Muslim patients. They can advertise to invite applicants or contact the nearest Islamic center to ask for recommendations and contact information. CAIR's website includes information that can help find the nearest Islamic center (See the back cover for CAIR's internet address).

## **Autopsy**

Islam prohibits the mutilation of dead bodies because it shows lack of respect for the dead. Unless required by the police in connection with an investigation, an autopsy should not be performed. However, autopsy for medical research may be acceptable if respect for the body can be guaranteed. Providers should carefully explain the need for the procedure with the patients and/or their relatives.

## **Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia**

The Quran teaches that God is the giver and taker of life. Prophet Muhammad taught that suicide is a grave sin. Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not permitted.

## **Abortion and Stillborns**

Muslims do not generally approve of abortion, although many would welcome other birth control measures. Still, abortion is permissible to save the life of the mother. Burial of stillborns is a very sensitive matter. Many Muslim patients would strongly oppose treating miscarried fetuses as "medical waste" and would insist on a proper funeral and burial. Health care providers must carefully consult with the parents on this issue.

## **Other Medical Procedures**

- Blood transfusions are permissible. Some patients may prefer directed blood donations (from relatives) to anonymous ones.
- Maintaining a terminal patient on artificial life support for a prolonged period in vegetative state is not encouraged.
- Transplantation is generally allowed after consultation with the patient or his/her guardians.
- Organ donation is permissible if there is a will or if the family permits it.

- Artificial reproductive technology, including surrogate motherhood, sperm and embryo donation, is not permitted except between husband and wife during the span of an intact marriage.

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