

## Spiritual Care/Prayers

- Sikhs have different prayers for different times of the day. There are no set prescribed hours for prayer, but many practicing Sikhs pray in the early hours of the morning. The patient should be consulted as to when they would prefer to pray.
- Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) holds prayers for a large congregation, they will also have Sikh priests, known as a Granthi who may wish to visit the patient to discuss matters of spirituality.
- Sikhs may wish to listen to Kirtan, sacred music which offers some peace to the soul.
- Sikhs may also wish to meditate, for this they may ask to be in a room which is peaceful in order to calm the mind.

## End Of Life care

Everything that happens is the will of God. Healing through prayer and through medicine are both possible. Many people will willingly accept the will of God rather than go through difficult treatments. When a patient dies, scripture reading and prayer are carried out, and a service for the deceased is held about a week later (this can vary).

For most patients, having his/her relatives and friends nearby, and having access to a Sikh Granthi (a Sikh priest), who can recite Gurbani (writings of the Gurus) and perform Sikh prayers are an essential part of their final days. At the departure of their loved ones, Sikhs console themselves with the recitation of their sacred hymns.

With minimal delay, once they have passed away the body is to be removed to the funeral home to prepare for cremation, unless the family is waiting for a close relative to arrive. Providing routine post-mortem care is permissible. The body should be covered with clean linens and shrouded. If the person is wearing any of the 5K's, they should remain with the body.

Allow the family and the Sikh Granthi to follow Sikh traditions for preparing the dead body for funeral. The dead body should be given the same respect as during life.

In certain cases, if permissible, the family may wash and clothe the body immediately after death, prior to removal.

## Culture and Celebrations

A Calendar, known as the Nanakashi Calendar provides dates of all the main religious dates, and has details of each of the 12 religious months which differ from the Western Calendar. Sikhs also see the first day of each month, according to the Sikh calendar as an auspicious day.

- Guru Gobind Singh's birthday (the tenth guru of Sikhs), in January, is celebrated in congregations at Gurdwaras.
- Vaisakhi (or Baisakhi) festival falls in mid-April. It is a celebration of the day that the Khalsa order was created in 1699.
- Martyrdom day of the fifth Sikh Guru Arjan Dev is commemorated in June.
- The enthronement day of Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Scripture) is also celebrated in October.
- Diwali, in October, is a festival of lights and to the Sikhs a reminder of the time when their sixth Guru returned to Amritsar after the Mughal rulers released him from the fort of Gwalior. People exchange gifts and distribute sweets on this day.
- Martyrdom day of the ninth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur is commemorated in November.
- Guru Nanak Dev's birthday (founder of Sikh faith) in November is celebrated and regarded as one of the key dates in the religious calendar.

**Contact the Sikh Healthcare Chaplaincy Group for further information or should you need to clarify any issues that may arise on**

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**Also, consult the guide  
caring for a Sikh patient  
of resources and  
explanations on Sikh  
issues.**



# CARING FOR A SIKH PATIENT

A pocket guide



The Sikh faith is the fifth largest in the world and has over 20 million followers. Its founder Guru Nanak Dev was born in 1469, in Punjab (a region in India). Nine Gurus (divine teachers) followed him.

Sikhism preaches a message of devotion and remembrance of God at all times, truthful living, equality of mankind, social justice and denounces superstitions and blind rituals. Sikhism is open to all through the teachings of its 10 Gurus enshrined in the Sikh holy book and Living Guru, Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

The word 'Sikh' in the Punjabi language means 'disciple', Sikhs are the disciples of God who follow the writings and teachings of the Ten Sikh Gurus. The wisdom of these teachings in Sri Guru Granth Sahib is practical and universal in their appeal to all mankind.

## Religious Beliefs

The fundamental belief of Sikhs is that there is only One, Universal, Formless, Timeless God of all the people, Who is also the creator of this universe and all living beings.

Baptised Sikhs, also known as the "Khalsa", **at all times** wear on their person five religious symbols that are articles of faith. They are known as the 5K's because their names start with the letter "K."

The Five K's (Articles of Faith) are:

- 1) Un-cut hair (Kesh), a gift from God representing spirituality;
- 2) A wooden comb (Kangha), symbolizes cleanliness;
- 3) A steel bracelet (Kara), represents self restraint and link to God;
- 4) A short sword (Kirpan), an emblem of courage and commitment to truth and justice;
- 5) A type of underwear (Kachh or Kasher), represents purity of moral character.

The religious significance of the turban for men or a headscarf (chunni) for women should be respected, because it is a covering for one of the 5K's (Kesh) and is also a symbol of a Sikh's honour.

Sikhs believe that whosoever is born has eventually to die. The physical body is perishable, but the soul is eternal. The soul is a part of God and it yearns reunion with the Supreme Being. Liberation from the cycle of birth and death, from millions of life forms, is the basis of the Sikh understanding of the purpose of life. Human life is the gift of the Divine, and its termination, a return to the Divine source.

## Beliefs Related to Health Care

During times of sickness and disease, Sikhs pray to seek God's help, remember Waheguru (God's name) to obtain peace, ask for forgiveness, and recite or listen to Gurbani, the sacred hymns, which are God's words, uttered through the Sikh Gurus and enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Scripture). The sacred word provides them with physical and spiritual strength and nourishment. Sikh patients may request audiotapes/Cds of Keertan (sacred music) be played by their bedside. Sikh patients may consider illness to be the will of God, and also believe that God is merciful and benevolent, but one has to make an effort to get well which includes medical treatment.

## General Beliefs and Practices (Individual Practices May Vary)

- Blood transfusions are allowed.
- Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not encouraged. Sikhs are discouraged in their faith to terminate their lives before the will of God dictates. Sikhs have a high respect for life which they see as a gift from God and that we have a duty to use life in a responsible way. Most Sikhs are against euthanasia, as they believe that the timing of birth and death should be left in God's hands.
- Organ transplantation, both donating and receiving, is allowed. Sikh philosophy and teachings place great emphasis on the importance of giving and putting others before oneself. Sikh teachings also stress the importance of noble deeds, selfless giving and sacrifice. This is exemplified by the behaviour of the ten Gurus in the Sikh teachings. Saving a human life is one of the greatest things one can do according to the Sikh religion. For this reason, donating organs after death is acceptable to Sikhs. Sikhs believe in life after death, and a continuous cycle of rebirth. But the physical body is not needed in this cycle. The soul of a person is eternal, but the body is simply flesh and perishable. If another person can make use of organs from a Sikh's body, this is a good thing.
- Post-Mortem examinations are permitted. Though no hair should be removed during the investigation.
- Genetic engineering to cure a disease is acceptable. To date, Sikhs are opposed to human cloning.
- Infants are not circumcised.
- Still births are considered to be treated the same as living individuals and Sikh families tend to perform funerals for babies that are still born.

## Diet/Food Preference & Practices

Sikhs do not eat any meat that is ritually prepared by either sacrificing the animal to please God, or by killing the animal slowly to drain out the blood. Halal meat, (meat prepared the Islamic way), is forbidden for Sikhs to partake as is Kosher meat.

Vegetarian or non-vegetarian meals are individual preferences. If there are no dietary restrictions, the patient may be asked his/her food preferences, and/or allowed to bring food from home. Sikhs do not observe fasting for any religious reasons.

## Medical & Nursing Care

- Do not interrupt a praying patient for routine care.
- Be sensitive to the significance of the Sikh's five K's, (religious symbols or articles of faith) which they may choose to wear on their person at all times. Again, they are uncut hair (Kesh), a wooden comb (Kangha), a steel bracelet (Kara), underwear (Kachh or Kasher), and a ceremonial sword (Kirpan).
- After removing their headdress, Sikh patients may want to keep their head covered with an alternative covering such as a small turban or a scarf. The head dress should be respected, and if removed, it should be given to the family or placed with the patient's personal belongings. Do not place the head dress with the shoes or on the floor.
- Consult the patient, family (or the parents in case of an child) prior to shaving or removing hair from any part of the patient's body. This applies to both male and female patients.
- Infants may be required to wear religious symbols e.g. "Kara" (a steel bracelet).
- Cleanliness is part of the Sikh way of life. Daily bathing and personal hygiene care should be provided unless advised otherwise by the attending physician due to a medical reason. Washing and conditioning of hair, including male facial hair, with shampoo or soap should be done as frequently as needed. Hair can be dried naturally or with an electric hair dryer. Hair should be combed daily at a minimum.
- It is a Sikh cultural and religious practice to visit the sick. Be open and understanding of visits by family members, children and well wishers, when practical.
- Faith and its practice is individual, be prepared to listen to the family or the patient about specific practices they may or may not prescribe to. Remember, baptised Sikhs are the Khalsa and will be the strictest of all in maintaining the code of conduct, others may have uncut hair but still prescribe to the Sikh philosophy, and pray and adopt certain Sikh practices. Sikhism does not judge individuals and each person should have individual access to their own prescribed way of doing things.