

# A HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL'S GUIDE

to Islamic Religious Practices





## INTRODUCTION

The information in this booklet is designed to assist health care providers in developing policies and procedures aimed at the delivery of culturally competent patient care. It can also serve as a guide for the accommodation of religiously mandated practices of Muslim patients.

The information contained in this guide relates to Islam as practiced by a majority of the American Muslim community. There are a number of smaller sects of Islam with variations in theology and practice. The staff at a local Islamic center or mosque can help to clarify the sincerely held religious beliefs of smaller sects.

Parts of this guide may sound repetitive as it is intended to use as needs arrive. It remains a best practice for caregivers who frequently work with Muslims to review the guide's full content.



## MUSLIM VIEW OF ILLNESS AND TREATMENT

Muslims consider illness, like other life events, as a test from God. As such, they often respond with patience and prayers. Death is seen as part of every human's ultimate journey to the next life. However, the Quran urges Muslims not to have a fatalistic attitude towards life. The Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him] taught that maintaining a healthy body is an individual's duty. He urged Muslims to seek treatment where it was needed. Caring for the weak and sick is a collective, societal responsibility. Providers of care are honored.

Families or patients may wish to consult with religious leaders in their community when dealing with particular medical conditions. Imams, prayer leaders, will issue recommendations and support, based on individual circumstances. Providing and encouraging access to such counsel is invaluable to Muslim patients and families.

**The Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him] taught that maintaining a healthy body is an individual's duty. He urged Muslims to seek treatment where it was needed.**

### ISLAM IN BRIEF

Islam is a faith system and comprehensive way of life. Its name comes from the Arabic root word salaam, which means peace. The term Islam itself means "to achieve peace through submission to God." A Muslim is a follower of Islam. Muslims see Islam as a continuation of Judaism

and Christianity, the other Abrahamic faiths. Arabic is Islam's founding language. Prayers are recited in Arabic. The Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him], who Muslims believe is God's last prophet, provides Muslims with an example of the ethics and best practices of a good life.

### The faith is built on five pillars:

1. **Declaration of belief in a monotheistic God.** Allah is Arabic for "The One God."
2. **Prayer.** Since prayer is an aspect of Islam you will likely encounter if you interact with Muslims, it is discussed at length below. See section **Prayer**.
3. **Charity.** After a Muslim has paid their required expenses such as food and shelter, they are required to offer approximately 2.5 percent of what remains to charity. Zakat is the Arabic term for this charity.
4. **Fasting.** Since fasting is an aspect of Islam you will likely encounter if you interact with Muslims, it is discussed at length below. See section **Ramadan**.
5. **Pilgrimage:** Once during their lifetime those Muslims who can afford to do so and are healthy must make a pilgrimage to Mecca, Islam's holy city located in present day Saudi Arabia.



## PRAYER

Islam prescribes that believers pray five times daily. The goal is to ensure Muslims remain connected to and conscious of their creator.

Muslims frequently use a small prayer rug to ensure they are performing their worship on a clean surface. Patients may choose to bring a prayer rug and/or a Quran to the hospital. As an expression of respect, caregivers should avoid stepping on the prayer rug or placing anything on top of the Quran and refrain from interrupting the worshiper during times of prayer.

Individuals with limited mobility may use a chair to complete some of the physical components of prayer. Patients who cannot stand or kneel may pray using head motions or eye motions in their beds.

Hospitalized patients and individuals in nursing homes may ask to be alerted when prayer times arrives to help fulfill this religious duty on time.

Relatives and friends who visit patients at prayer times would appreciate if health care providers could inform them about the nearest chapel or other appropriate space where prayer can be offered. These spaces should be clean, quiet, and dry, and should preferably offer some privacy. If possible, the space should be free from images of people or religious icons. It should be large enough for Muslim worshipers to stand, bow, kneel, and touch their forehead to the ground.



## TIMING OF THE FIVE DAILY PRAYERS

Prayer times are determined by the position of the sun. Muslims usually keep prayer timetables, easily obtained on the internet, which are calculated for specific geographical locations. Once a prayer's window comes in, it takes 10-15 minutes to complete the ritual ablution and prayer.

### Timing of Islam's five daily prayers



**Morning prayer (Fajr)** Dawn, before sunrise.



**Noon prayer (Zuhr)** Midday, after the sun passes its highest point, until afternoon.



**Afternoon prayer (Asr)** Late afternoon until just before sunset.



**Sunset prayer (Maghrib)** sunset until full darkness.



**Night prayer (Isha)** darkness until midnight.

### Ritual Ablution or Wudu

Prayers are preceded by a ritual ablution called wudu, which requires the washing of the hands, face, and feet with clean water. It can be performed in any facility that has running water. In emergencies where running water is unavailable, wudu can be performed with clean water in a bowl.

In hospital settings, some patients may require assistance with washing. The procedure may also take longer according to mobility restraints.

Patients with severely limited mobility may perform tayammum, or a symbolic ablution, if no one is available to assist. Tayammum can also apply to areas of the body that cannot come into contact with water for medical reasons, such as a cast or bandage.

### **Call to Prayer**

The adhan, or call to prayer, announces the arrival of prayer time. A slightly altered version is recited as prayer begins.

### **Performing the Prayer**

The prayer itself includes specific recitations from the Quran and physical components of standing, bowing, and touching one's forehead to the ground. It is often performed on a prayer rug. (See religious items below.) All of this is done while facing toward Mecca. In North America, this means the person will face generally northeast. Patients with restricted mobility may do their best to turn their head in Mecca's direction, or they may just face whatever direction they are currently in.

During prayers, except in cases of emergencies, the penitent cannot respond to questions. The individual or congregation will wait to respond until prayer is finished. Worship can be performed in any quiet, dry, clean place where there is adequate space for an individual to perform the required motions associated with prayer. Bathrooms are not considered appropriate spaces in which to perform prayer.





## Friday Congregational Prayer

Friday is the day for congregational prayer called Jummah. There is a sermon, or khutbah, delivered by an imam, followed by congregational prayers. An imam is simply a prayer leader and can be selected from among congregants. These services are considered a religious obligation for those who are physically capable, and thus all efforts should be made to allow Muslims to attend. The length of the service is generally around 30-60 minutes.

Space for the service should be clean and free of depictions of living creatures, although other artistic designs are permissible. The room must be large enough for each congregant to stand, sit, kneel, and prostrate comfortably. Although total privacy is not required and visitors may be allowed to observe, they must not interrupt the imam during services or walk in front of worshippers at prayer.

Based on differences in theology, various Islamic sects may prefer to worship separately.

Sick persons are not required to attend congregational prayer. However, many Muslim patients may still wish to attend the Friday Prayer in order to benefit from the sermon and to connect with their spiritual community. Seniors in nursing homes would benefit from assistance in traveling to the nearest mosque for Jummah prayers. Mosque administrators may be willing to help arrange for transportation and accommodation of people who are elderly or limited in mobility.

**Sick persons are not required to attend congregational prayer. However, many Muslim patients may still wish to attend the Friday Prayer.**

## Religious Items

You may encounter any of several items associated with Islam as you interact with Muslims.

### Prayer Rugs

Muslims often use a rug or mat to cover the ground on which they are praying. A prayer rug is approximately the size of a large towel and is often printed with Islamic symbols. It should be treated with respect and never thrown, stepped on with shoes, or put in a dirty place. Hospital patients may be provided with a clean towel or a blanket-weight cloth or sheet as a substitute for a rug.

### Prayer Beads

Prayer beads, known as "Misbaha" or "Tasbeih" in Arabic, are used by some Muslims for devotional practice. Common phrases recited on the prayer beads include "Subhan Allah" (Glory be to Allah), "Alhamdulillah" (Praise be to Allah), and "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the Greatest). The use of prayer beads varies among individuals and cultures.

### Religious Texts

The Quran is considered by Muslims to be God's word as transmitted to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. Hadith are Prophet Muhammad's word and actions. Compilations of these words and actions, such as Sahih al Bukhari or Sahih Muslim, are considered an important source of religious knowledge for some Muslims.

Qurans or Hadith texts must be treated with respect. These items should not be placed on the floor, tossed, thrown, or otherwise damaged.



## Ramadan

Ramadan is Islam's holy month. It is a time of fasting, prayer, reflection, and spiritual growth. Islam uses a lunar calendar; as a result, each year Ramadan's start date changes in relation to the Gregorian calendar. You should check with local Muslim organizations for guidance on when Ramadan starts in any given year.

Generally, an illness exempts a person from fasting if the performance of the fast would worsen or exacerbate the illness or condition.

If necessary, a sick person can defer fasting and make up the missed days during a later period or offer fidyah, or a meal for the poor, as an alternative. Fasting does not inhibit the provision of emergency medical care. In non-emergency situations, fasting Muslims will usually agree to medical testing but not to nutritional intravenous injections. Drops put in the eyes or ears can be administered, as can vital injections, blood tests, and medications absorbed through the skin.

**If necessary, a sick person can defer fasting and make up the missed days during a later period or offer fidyah, or a meal for the poor, as an alternative.**

## Ramadan Fasting

During the month of Ramadan, abstaining from food, drink, and other pleasures during the daylight hours is obligatory for those who are physically and mentally capable. Islam exempts the very young, very old, those with health issues, and other conditions from the practice. Pregnant, lactating, and menstruating women may also not fast.

Fasting Muslims may also choose to forego medications during the daily fasting period, to the extent that their health will not be harmed.

Before sunrise, Muslims eat a morning meal known as suhoor. At sunset, the fast is broken with a meal known as iftar. Traditionally, fasts are broken with dates and water. Muslim staff should be afforded the time to eat during these windows. Muslims in caregiving settings should be provided with breakfast before dawn and a double portion of food, the equivalent of lunch and dinner, after sunset.

## Ramadan Prayer

Muslims may observe a special prayer during the night called Taraweeh. During this prayer, the prayer leader will recite one-thirtieth of the Quran each night, so that the entire holy book is recited by Ramadan's end. This generally takes up to two hours each evening.

## Examinations

Islamic modesty and respect often mean avoiding physical contact between men and women who are not related to each other. It also means avoiding revealing parts of your body to members of the opposite sex. Where possible, avoid examinations by staff who are not of the same sex as the person being examined. In cases where disrobing, including removing a hijab, is necessary, care should be taken to ensure that only persons of the same biological sex are in the room with the person being examined.

## **Clothing and Dress**

Muslims generally practice modesty in their dress. Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their wisdom, skills, and contribution to the community, rather than for physical attractiveness.

Staff should not demand the removal of any piece of clothing unless there is a clear need for it. Female patients may wish to maintain their head covering even in bed. Staff may hang a “please knock” sign on their door, so that if a male needs to enter the room, a knock can give the patient the opportunity to replace her scarf or other religious covering.

### ***Kufi***

Many Muslim men choose to wear a small cap, called a kufi, as a symbol of their modesty and connection to God. There are no religious requirements that kufis be any particular color.

### ***Beard***

Some Muslim men choose to grow beards in emulation of the Prophet Muhammad.

### ***Hijabs***

Many women choose to wear a hijab, which typically refers to a headscarf, wrapped around the head, covering the hair, ears, and neck. Women may also choose to wear long sleeves and/or long pants.

## **Hygiene**

Islam places great emphasis on hygiene in both spiritual and physical terms. In addition to the ritual cleaning before prayer discussed above, many Muslims wash with water after urination or defecation. A small container to assist with washing can be placed near the toilet. For a bedbound patient, a beaker of water is suitable for washing after use of a bed pan.

## Dietary Restrictions

Muslims do not consume alcohol, pork, and any pork by-products or derivatives. Muslims also follow certain standards in slaughter and preparation of meat and poultry, called halal. Care must be taken to ensure that Muslims are provided with meals that meet religious requirements.

Islamic dietary restrictions are like kosher requirements. It is not the case that an item is halal only by virtue of being non-pork. Some objectionable food items include:

- Pork and pork-by products such as pig-derived pepsin. Lard in any product.
- Animal shortening in bread, puddings, cookies, cakes, donuts, etc. (Vegetable shortening is acceptable.)
- Animal-based gelatin in Jell-O, desserts, candies, marshmallows, chocolates, etc.
- Blood and blood by-products.
- Alcohol and food ingredients containing alcohol, such as vanilla extract and Dijon mustard, or sauces prepared with alcohol.

Some Muslims may also find the consumption of fish without scales, such as catfish, to be objectionable. However, most varieties of fish, soy products, vegetables, etc. are considered halal by default.

Health care centers can order Muslims special meals from certified halal food providers.

Physicians should avoid prescribing medical pills coated with pork-extracted gelatin. Many medications such as cough syrups often contain alcohol; if possible, alternatives to these medications should be provided.

For example, the pediatric formulations of most cough syrups do not contain alcohol and can be given to adult patients once dosage is adjusted. In the event that no suitable alternative is available for medicines of porcine origin or medicines containing alcohol, the patient must be made aware of the medicine's origins and contents so they can make an informed decision.

### **Childbirth and Newborns**

Following prophetic tradition, Muslim parents whisper the adhan, or call to prayer, into the right ear of a newly born baby. This ensures that the first words the infant hears are an invitation to follow God.

Circumcision is required only of male babies and usually takes place within the first seven days of life, unless a medical reason requires the procedure to be postponed.

Some cultural traditions require the burial of the placenta after birth, as it is considered part of the human body and therefore sacred. If there are medical reasons for not providing the placenta to parents, these should be clearly explained.

Generally, other religious rituals for newborns may be delayed and are usually performed at home. For babies that require a longer stay in the hospital, communication with parents about required religious practices is important.

Islam does not allow the practice of female circumcision or genital cutting in any fashion. Religious authorities agree that the practice is irreligious. In the event that providers are faced with such a request, local Muslim leaders may advise the family and educate them about the matter.

**Circumcision is required only of male babies and usually takes place within the first seven days of life, unless a medical reason requires the procedure to be postponed.**

## Death and Stillborns

Muslims believe that every person has an appointed term in life. Death is the end of the testing phase of earthly life, allowing one to move on to judgment and reward or punishment in the eternal life. The death of infants and children is regarded as a tremendous trial from God. Babies and children who die go straight to Heaven, where they pray for their parents through the remainder of the parent's lives.

It is essential that family members be notified when a patient is dying. Families and close friends will wish during the last days of life to hold special prayers with the person. It is very common to hear constant recitation of the Quran from the patient and from their family and friends. In the event that the family cannot be present, a local imam may be consulted to counsel the patient.

When a Muslim dies, friends and family commonly repeat the Arabic phrase "Inna-li-llahi Wa-inna-ilahyi Raji'oon," which means "from God we come and to God we return."

## Funerals

When a person dies, funeral planning and preparations for burial begin immediately. Burial is intended to take place within three days. Following the death, family members may wish for the face, or whole body, of their deceased to be turned towards Mecca. Family or community members must wash the body of the dead and cover him or her with a white cloth or sheet. It is preferred that the body be handled only by persons of the same biological sex.

The imam or local Islamic organization should be contacted as soon as possible to begin preparations for the janaza, or funeral service. Cremation is not permitted, and embalming should not be performed unless required by law. Muslims do not use caskets unless required by law. Many communities have specific cemeteries in which Islamic funerals and burials are held.

Many patients have a provision in their wills or end-of-life directives that specify where they will be buried and



who should handle their funeral and burial. Such requests should be accommodated wherever possible. Staff may ask about such a will and encourage patients to put these requests in writing where they do not already exist.

For many Islamic schools of thought, the death of a fetus past the age of 120 days is considered as the death of a viable baby. In the event of a miscarriage, intra-uterine death, or stillbirth of a fetus past 120 days, Muslim parents may wish to observe full funeral rites.

### **Autopsies**

Islam discourages the performance of autopsies as they delay burial and are considered a disrespect to the dead. However, if required by law or in the performance of a criminal investigation, an autopsy is permissible. Similarly, in cases where the cause of death is in question, an autopsy may be performed.

### **Organ Donors**

Organ donation is permissible after death if specified in the will, or other legally recognized means such as on a driver's license, of the deceased.

### **Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia**

Most Muslims are opposed to the practice of assisted suicide, as the Quran teaches that God is the ultimate giver and taker of life. To take an active role in ending a patient's life and hasten oncoming death is viewed as an act of killing, which is a major sin forbidden by Islam. Suicide is also viewed as a grave sin.

### **Abortions**

Although Muslims generally do not approve of abortion, there is some variance in views on when abortion is permissible. Religious authorities all agree that abortion is permissible if continuing the pregnancy threatens the mother's life or health. Some schools of thought permit abortion in the early stages of fetal development, particularly when the pregnancy is less than 120 days old. These schools of thought view early abortion as a sin but not a punishable wrong.

## Contraception

Islam regards children as a gift from God. The Quran teaches that families should not hesitate to bring children into the world out of fear or for selfish reasons – God will provide for them. However, many Muslims are unopposed to the use of contraception specifically in the context of a marital relationship between husband and wife, particularly where the health of the mother or the well-being of the family is concerned.

In cases dealing with abortion and the use of contraception, religious leaders consider each case carefully on an individual basis and will issue a ruling or conclusion based on the circumstances at hand. The most important thing for medical providers is to allow a family or individual to consult with a religious authority and assist in providing such access.



## Other Medical Procedures

- Blood transfusions are permissible, particularly where recovery would be impossible without the transfusion. Some patients may prefer directed blood donations from relatives over anonymous ones.
- If a patient still has any possibility of an active, conscious life, withdrawal of life support is considered active euthanasia. However, maintaining a terminal patient on life support for a prolonged period in a brain dead or persistent vegetative state is not encouraged. It is recommended to get a religious leader's interpretation of individual circumstances.
- Transplantation is generally allowed after consultation with the patient and/or guardians so long as the transplant does not bring harm to the donor.
- In cases of organ or skin transplants, tissue of porcine origin is not permitted.
- Cosmetic surgery is considered permissible for reconstruction or for health reasons but is not allowed for purely beautification purposes.

## Mental Health

A person diagnosed as having a cognitive dysfunction such as a severe mental illness or intellectual disability is absolved from all obligatory requirements in Islam. For example, they are not required to say daily prayers, fast, or perform the pilgrimage. Persons with mental illnesses are a creation of Allah, God Almighty; they deserve special consideration and dignified care.

For providers of mental health services, it is important to understand the particular religious practices of a Muslim patient. For example, the repetitive movements of daily prayer are not a sign of compulsive behavior; rather, they are part of the prayer ritual itself. Fasting during Ramadan is not necessarily a sign of disordered eating. Mental

health providers are encouraged to connect with a local imam or Muslim organization for assistance in serving Muslim patients.

### **Holidays**

Eid days are major holidays devoted to spending time with family and community. Elective medical tests and other procedures should be scheduled around these holidays wherever possible.

Hospital administrators may add Muslim holidays to their calendars. Islam uses a lunar calendar, and as a result, each year the dates for the below holidays change in relation to the Gregorian calendar. You are advised to check with local Muslim leadership or institutions for guidance on when Ramadan starts in any given year.

### ***Eid al-Fitr***

Ramadan culminates in Eid al-Fitr (Festival of the Fast Breaking), a joyous celebration. An Eid prayer, a modified form of the congregational Friday prayer, is performed as a community.

### ***Eid al-Adha***

The second Eid is celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth Islamic month and is called Eid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice). Eid al-Adha coincides with the completion of the annual Hajj pilgrimage. Just like Eid al-Fitr, an Eid prayer is performed as a community.

### ***Ashura***

For Shi'ite Muslims, Ashura is observed to mourn the killing of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and dozens of the Prophet's [peace be upon him] family members and companions at the Battle of Karbala.



## **GLOSSARY OF MUSLIM TERMS**

**Adhan:** Islamic call to worship, recited at prescribed times of day.

**Allah:** Arabic word for God, translates as “The One God.”

**Eid:** A major religious holiday; a day of festivity.

**Halal:** Permissible by Islamic law.

**Hijab:** Clothing many Muslim wear in public; generally, loose-fitting and includes a head covering.

**Iftar:** Fast-breaking meal at sundown during the month of Ramadan.

**Imam:** Spiritual leader.

**Jummah:** Friday congregational prayer service.

**Khutbah:** Sermon delivered during Jummah prayer.

**Kufi:** A small round cap worn by some Muslim men.

**Quran:** Islam’s holy scripture; also, sometimes spelled Koran.

**Ramadan:** Holy month of fasting, during which Muslims abstain from food, drink, and sensory pleasures from sunrise to sunset.

**Shahada:** The declaration of faith: “There is no god but God and Mohammad is the messenger of God.”

**Suhoor:** Meal eaten before dawn during the month of Ramadan.

**Wudu:** Ritual ablution or washing before prayers.

**Zakat:** A required charity generally equivalent to 2.5 percent of a Muslims income after they have paid their basic living expenses.

**The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is America’s largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization.** Our mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

© Copyright 2024

Council on American-Islamic Relations  
[www.cair.com](http://www.cair.com)