

# Muslims West from Asia



## Introduction

**W**est Asia covers a large geographical area from Pakistan and Afghanistan west to the Mediterranean sea, including Syria, Jordan, Iran, Iraq and the Saudi peninsula. Because the number of ethnic groups in this area is large, it would be unrealistic to believe that a profile could be more than a very broad overview. To illustrate this great cultural diversity, Afghanistan alone has 19 ethnically distinct groups. Iraq is 76% Arabic, 19% Kurd, with the remaining 5% comprising Turkomans, Assyrians, Armenians, and various smaller groups. Each group has its own language.

Islam appears to be the one common theme binding this region together. Even this, however, is an overgeneralisation. There are numerous other religious groups in West Asia including Christians, Jews, Baha'i, and Zoroastrians. Even among the Muslims, there are a number of different groups with the main division being between Sunni and Shi'a, and this is further complicated by the fact that the practice of Islam can vary widely across the cultures even within these groupings.

Accepting the wide variability in this region, this profile will cover issues that apply mainly to Muslim clients. The information will necessarily be general, and only provide a broad overview. Your individual Muslim client from West Asia may relate to only a few of these points.

## Religion

### Islam

Sunni and Shi'a Islam differ in the succession of leadership. Sunni Muslims believe that after the death of Mohammed the leadership of the Islamic community passed to a succession of Caliphs elected by the community from the Quraish, the tribe of the Prophet. The Shi'ites believe that on the death of Mohammed the spiritual leadership of Islam passed to a line of imams descended from the Prophet through his son-in-law and cousin Ali.

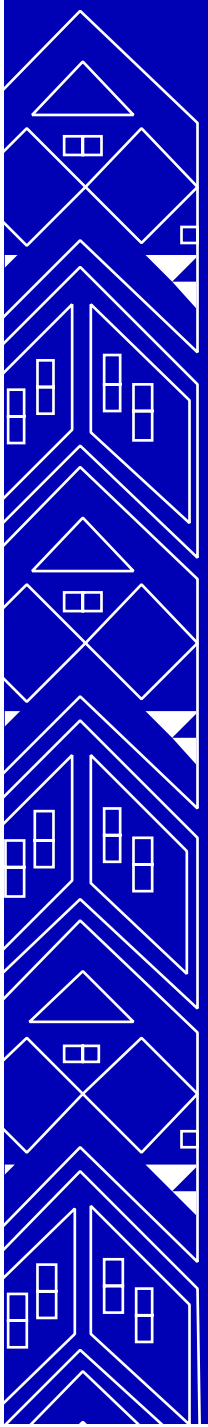
### Prayer

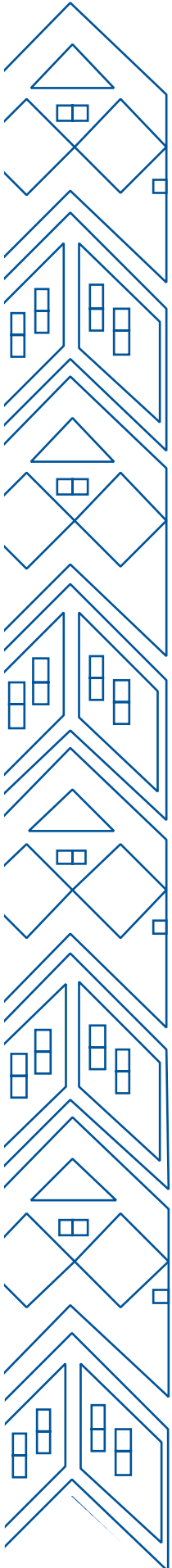
Strict Muslims pray five times a day, starting before sunrise and ending at night. During prayer, the head must be facing towards Mecca (west-north-west in Brisbane) and the forehead touching the ground. Friday is a religious day and men attend the mosque.

A sick person may need privacy during the day at prayer times and assistance in facing Mecca and the pre-prayer washing of face, feet, hands and forearms. People are not allowed to pray before thorough cleaning with water.

### Food

Islam permits the consumption of 'halal' meat only. This is meat that has been killed according to Islamic law. Pig products are not





eaten and a few seafoods may not be allowed. Alcohol is prohibited. Water is traditionally taken with a meal.

### **Fasting**

Fasting is required during Ramadan, the ninth lunar month, with no food or drink consumed between sunrise and sunset, although the ill are exempt. Fasting may also extend to the non-use of medications, including injections, during daylight hours.

### **Patient Interaction**

**M**any people from West Asia have come from politically troubled countries. They may not wish to discuss their political views.

In some communities, bad news is never told directly to a person for fear of the shock it may cause. The family may be reluctant for a patient to know that they are terminally ill. In these cases, a health care provider may wish to consult with the family.

It is important not to use the left hand when touching or giving materials to your Muslim client. The left hand is used for toilet hygiene.

Many Muslims do not like their head being touched. This is not a religious but a cultural practice.

### **Health in Australia**

**S**ome migrants from West Asia have health problems related to their obesity and lack of exercise. There is a high rate of smoking among men, and there is evidence of high rates of circulatory and endocrine disorders among men also.

## **Utilisation of Health Services**

**T**he structure of the Australian health system is complex and at times confusing for many people from West Asia. For instance, the system of obtaining a referral before a consultation with a specialist may be quite a new experience for many. To make an appointment to see a doctor can also be a struggle when one's English is poor.

Expectations of the health care provider are generally high and this can lead to "doctor shopping" if a doctor does not fulfil a patient's expectations by prescribing pills, giving injections, or performing minor procedures. Providing a careful explanation of a diagnosis and the appropriate treatment is, therefore, very important.

## **Health Beliefs and Practices**

### **Illness**

When a person is sick, it is usual for the family to notify all relatives. The sick person is usually happy to receive many visitors.

In hospital, women may wish to remain as fully clothed as possible, and many will choose to be seen only by female health professionals. Men may prefer to keep covered from waist to knee and be cared for only by male staff.

Both men and women will generally want water for washing before and after meals as well as for toilet hygiene.

### **Death**

When dying, a Muslim patient may prefer to face Mecca.

- ⦿ After death the body is covered with a sheet.
- ⦿ According to Islamic law the body must be buried within 24 hours of death.
- ⦿ The body must be thoroughly washed.
- ⦿ Muslims believe in life after death and believe the soul stays near the body until burial.
- ⦿ Some families may prefer to take a body home or to the mosque for preparation for burial.

Public grieving lasts for three, seven or forty days depending on the situation, with remembrance memorials on anniversaries.

If post-mortems are legally necessary, this must be explained to the relatives, because it is a culturally unusual practice.

Transplantation of human organs is not against Islam and organ donation is a matter of individual preference.

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## Psychosocial Stressors

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**P** psychosocial stressors will depend in large part on a person's country of origin and the circumstances under which they arrived. However, there are several broad themes which seem common to a number of migrants from West Asia.

### Language

Many people from West Asia will find it difficult to use interpreters of the opposite sex, especially when dealing with urinary or gynaecological matters. Use of the extended family or friends for interpreting in these circumstances may also cause embarrassment and disgrace.

### Torture and trauma

It is important for health professionals to be aware that migrants from a number of countries in West Asia, particularly those who have come as refugees, may be victims

of torture and trauma. This will be most likely for individuals and families who escaped from oppressive regimes or regions of conflict (notably Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon).

It is not necessarily obvious that a client is a victim of torture and trauma. For some West Asian cultures (for example Iranian culture), somatic ailments may conceal a range of deep-seated psychological disorders. (Some of these issues are discussed in greater detail in the profile on **Torture and Trauma**).

### employment

Men particularly may find that migration has precipitated a loss of social and economic status. Unemployment or unskilled work is fairly common, and they may find difficulty having qualifications recognised.

Some occupational problems may be cultural, such as absenteeism on Friday to attend the mosque.

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## Mental Health

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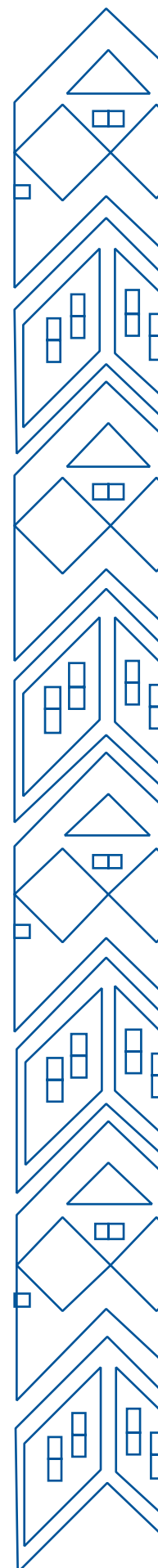
**D**ue to a past history of torture and trauma, many people from West Asia may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (see profile on **Torture and Trauma**). However, despite psychological difficulties in the family, many people are reluctant to talk about these issues outside the family. Only if the problem becomes major is outside help sought.

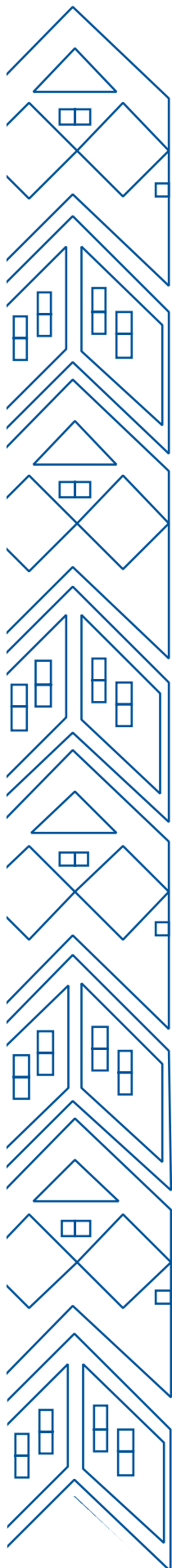
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## Maternal and Child Health

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**P**regnant and lactating women are exempted from fasting during Ramadan. Soon after birth the newborn Muslim child has the call to prayer recited in each ear. Some Muslims remove the hair of the newborn after birth. Circumcision is





performed on all male children before puberty - the specific age at which it occurs relates to the culture of origin.

### Contraception

In Islam, the rhythm method and coitus interruptus contraception are acceptable if both the husband and wife agree. Tubal ligation and vasectomy are not desirable in Islam, but other reversible contraception is allowed if there are medical grounds to avoid pregnancy.

### Abortion

In Islam abortion is not permitted unless there are very strong medical reasons, and it is not permitted after four months unless the mother's life is threatened.

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## Women's Health

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**W**omen recently arrived from West Asia tend to have poor awareness of issues related to women's health, though this depends on the country of origin. They may never have had a Pap smear or mammogram, and may not understand the importance of these investigations. They may avoid these services due to reluctance to undress in front of a health care provider, even when the provider is female.

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## Resources

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*Queensland Ethnic Affairs Directory 1997.*  
Department of the Premier and Cabinet.  
Office of Ethnic and Multicultural Affairs.

Islamic Council of Queensland  
Tel: (07) 3349 1137

Brisbane Migrant Resource Centre  
Tel: (07) 3844 8144

Ethnic Community Council of Queensland  
Tel: (07) 3844 9166

Logan City Multicultural Neighbourhood  
Centre Tel: (07) 3808 4463

Ethnic Communities Council Gold Coast  
Tel: (07) 5532 4300

Multicultural Information Network Service  
Inc. (Gympie)  
Tel: (07) 5483 9511

Migrant Resource Centre Townsville-  
Thuringowa Ltd.  
Tel: (077) 724 800

Translating and Interpreting Service  
Tel: 131 450

Queensland Program of Assistance to  
Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT)  
Tel: (07) 3844 3440

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## Acknowledgments

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**T**his profile was developed by Pascale Allotey, Lenore Manderson, Jane Nikles, Daniel Reidpath and Jo Sauvarin at the Australian Centre for International and Tropical Health at The University of Queensland on behalf of Queensland Health. It was developed with the assistance of community groups and health care providers. This is a slightly condensed form of the full profile which may be found on the Queensland Health INTRANET - QHiN <http://qhin.health.qld.gov.au/hssb/hou/hom.htm> and the Queensland Health INTERNET <http://qhin.health.qld.gov.au/hssb/hou/hom.htm>. The full profile contains some more detail and additional information. It also contains references to additional source material.

Material for this profile was drawn from a number of sources including various scholarly publications. In addition, *Culture & Health Care (1996)*, a manual prepared by the Multicultural Access Unit of the Health Department of Western Australia, and Ethnomed, a web-site developed by the Medical School at the University of Washington and devoted to health issues of ethnic communities, were particularly useful. The latter can be found at URL: <http://www.hslib.washington.edu/clinical/ethnomed>.