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section

Islamic beliefs affecting health care

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1. Food beliefs

Islam has rules about the types of food which are permissible (*halal*) and those which are prohibited (*haram*) for Muslims.

The main prohibited foods are pork and its by-products, alcohol, animal fats, and meat that has not been slaughtered according to Islamic rites.

While most prohibited foods are easy to identify, there are some foods which are usually *halal* that may contain ingredients and additives that can make them *haram*.

For example, foods made with vanilla essence are considered prohibited because vanilla essence contains alcohol. Other foods such as ice cream may contain pork by-products such as gelatine, which is considered *haram*.

A table outlining halal and haram foods is located in section three. More information can be accessed from the Islamic Council of Queensland. See section three for contact details.

2. Holy days

The two major festivals in the Islamic calendar are *Id al-Fitr* and *Id al-Adha*. Like festivals in other religions, these are a time for family reunion and special religious services. Muslim patients may wish to visit their homes during these times.

The holy month of *Ramadhan* is a spiritual month during which most Muslims fast. However, the young, old or sick are excused from fasting if it could be detrimental to their health.

Ramadhan is the ninth month in the Islamic year, which follows a lunar calendar.

Friday is a significant day to Muslims and a special prayer is performed at noon.

A religious calendar is published in the Queensland Health *Multicultural Clinical Support Resource* folder. www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/support_tools/mcsr.asp



3. Fasting

Fasting is an integral part of Islam and is seen as a means of purifying the body and the soul. While fasting during the month of *Ramadhan* is compulsory for all healthy, adult Muslims, Islam also prescribes other days which Muslims may choose to observe a voluntary fast.

During *Ramadhan*, Muslims are not permitted to eat or drink anything, including water, from dawn until dusk. It is a practice for Muslims to consume a pre-dawn meal before fasting during the day.

Each individual is responsible for deciding whether to fast. Pregnant, breastfeeding or menstruating women, people who are experiencing a temporary illness and travellers are exempted from fasting, but must make up for the fast at a later date.

A person experiencing an ongoing illness is exempted from fasting and may offer *fidyah* (provide a meal to the poor) as an alternative.

A fasting person may take the following medications/treatments without breaking their fast:

- injections and blood tests
- medications absorbed through the skin
- gargling (as long as no liquid is swallowed).

The following will break the fast:

- ear and nose drops
- suppositories and pessaries
- inhaled medications.

Diabetes Australia has a comprehensive guide for health care workers on fasting and diabetes titled *Diabetes and fasting for Muslims: A resource for health professionals*. www.diabetesaustralia.com.au/en/Living-with-Diabetes/Eating-Well/Diabetes--Fasting

A religious calendar showing the start and end of *Ramadhan* is published in the Queensland Health *Multicultural Clinical Support Resource* folder.

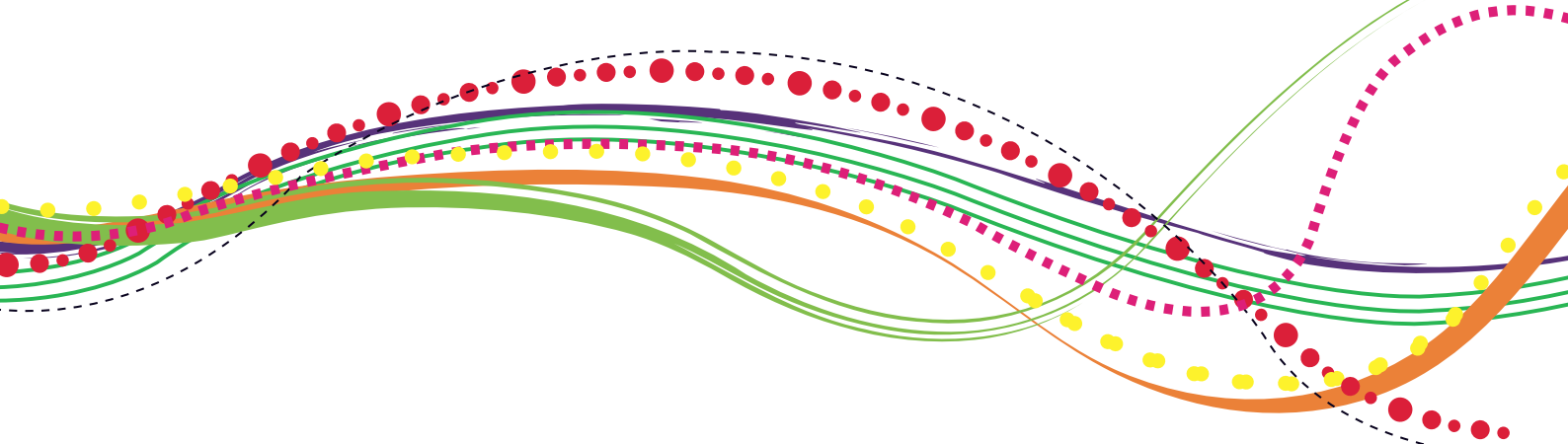
www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/support_tools/mcsr.asp

4. Dress

Islam requires both men and women to dress modestly when in public or in the presence of non-family members of the opposite sex.

For Muslim men, this usually means keeping the area between the navel and the knees covered, and for Muslim women, only the face, hands and feet are usually left exposed. This standard may not be followed by all Muslims. Some interpret the requirement for modesty to mean dressing modestly relative to the norms of the surrounding society.





The requirement for modesty can affect health care as some patients may be reluctant to expose their bodies for examination or to expose areas not directly affected. Some female patients may prefer a family member to be present during an examination.

5. Mental health and/or cognitive dysfunction

A person diagnosed as having a cognitive dysfunction, such as a severe mental illness or an intellectual disability, is absolved from all the obligatory requirements in Islam. For example, they are not required to say prayers, fast or perform their pilgrimage.

The patient's immediate or extended family is usually responsible for the patient.

Further information about mental health care for multicultural communities can be accessed through the Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre. www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/qtmhc

6. Embryo experimentation and stem cell research

Embryo experimentation, genetic testing and stem cell research are acceptable in Islam under certain conditions.

Stem cell research may only be conducted on stem cells that are derived from:

- frozen embryos that were created for the purpose of in vitro fertilisation and would otherwise have been destroyed
- adults.

Genetic testing and gene manipulation is acceptable for therapeutic purposes only.

7. Transplants and organ donation

There are strong views among Muslims about the permissibility of transplants and organ donation. Some Muslims view these procedures as acceptable and others believe they are unacceptable.

Further information about the permissibility of transplants and organ donations is available from the Council of Imams Queensland. See *section three for contact details*.

8. Sexual and reproductive health

Contraception

Muslims are permitted to use temporary contraceptive methods under certain conditions.

However, permanent contraceptive methods such as vasectomy and tubal ligation are only allowed where the woman's health is at risk from additional pregnancies.

Abortion

Under Islam, a foetus is considered alive after 120 days gestation. Abortion is not permitted after this time unless the pregnancy constitutes a serious threat to the life of the mother.

Abortion is permitted prior to 120 days under certain circumstances. For example, in the case of foetal abnormalities, when there is a serious health risk for the mother, or when pregnancy has occurred as a result of rape.

Abortion is not permitted on the basis of family planning.

Female genital mutilation (female circumcision)

Female genital mutilation is not mandated or condoned by Islam and is illegal in Queensland.

Female genital mutilation comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs, whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons.

Further information about female genital mutilation is available in the Queensland Health *Multicultural Clinical Support Resource* folder.

www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/support_tools/mcsr.asp



Assisted reproductive technologies

The use of assisted reproductive technologies is generally permitted in Islam.

However, there are some techniques and practices that are not permitted:

- the use of donor sperm is strictly prohibited
- the use of sperm that has been cryopreserved is prohibited if the father has died
- surrogacy is not permitted.

9. Death and dying

Muslims believe that death has been predestined by God. As a result, Muslims will often be accepting of death and illness.

Islam does not require treatment to be provided to a Muslim patient if it merely prolongs the final stages of a terminal illness.

Under these circumstances it is permitted to disconnect life supporting systems even though some organs continue to function automatically (e.g. the heart) under the effect of the supporting devices.

Suicide and euthanasia

Islam considers human life sacred and suicide and euthanasia are forbidden.

However, if a patient is suffering from a terminal condition and has been assessed as having no hope of recovery, it is permitted to stop medical treatment.

Grieving and bereavement

In Islam, public grief is allowed for only three days. This period allows for non-family members to visit and offer their condolences. After that period, the family is left to grieve privately.