

**Montgomery County
Office of Community
Partnerships**

**Asian Pacific American
Advisory Group**



Health care providers' handbook on

Sikh patients





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For more information on this initiative, please contact:

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Asian Pacific American Advisory Group
<https://montgomerycountymd.gov/partnerships/>

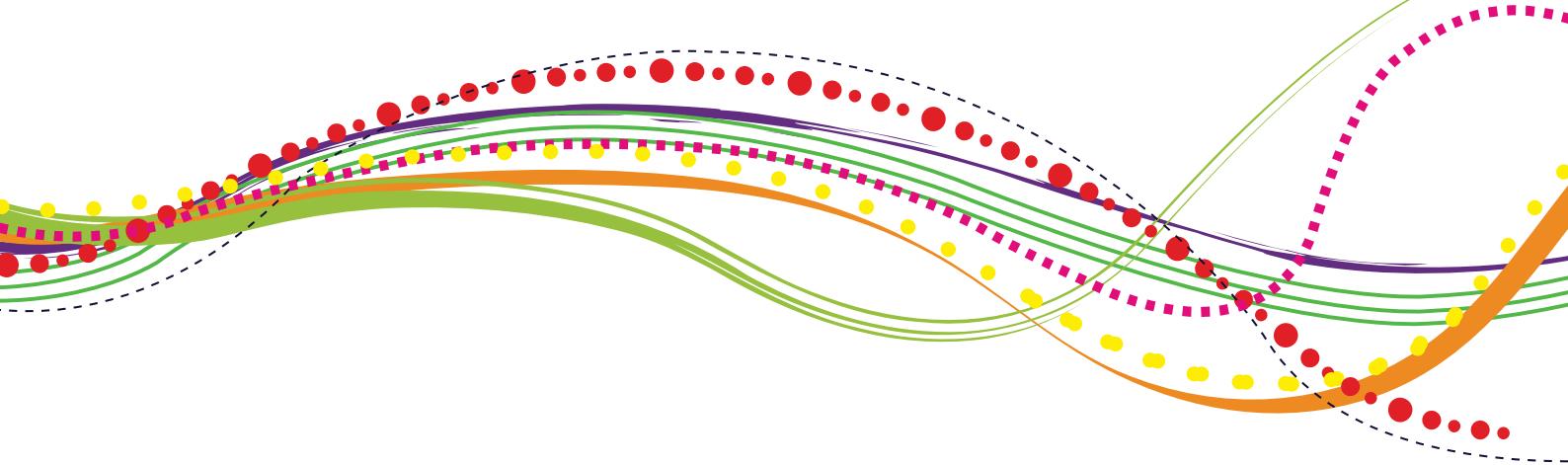
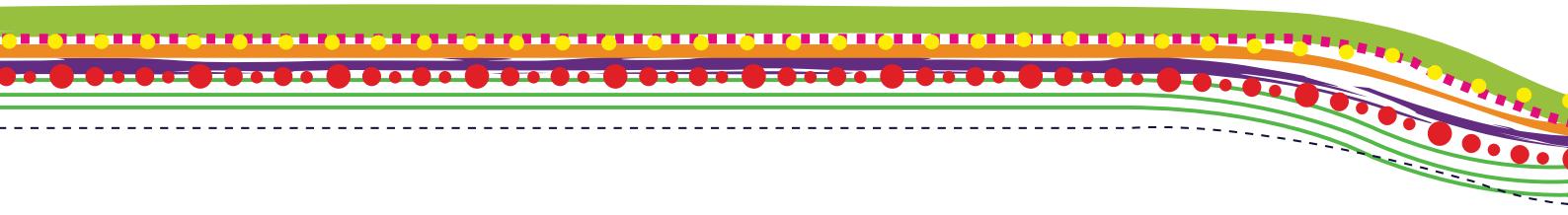


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Preface

This handbook, the Health Care Provider's Handbook on Sikh Patients, was originally created by Queensland Health (Government of Australia) and covers a range of topics and aims to inform health care providers about the religious beliefs and practices of Sikh patients that can affect health care. It has been adapted for use in the State of Maryland, United States of America, by the Montgomery County Office of Community Partnerships, Asian Pacific American Advisory Group.

The handbook has three sections:

- Guidelines for health services
- Sikh beliefs affecting health care
- Additional resources

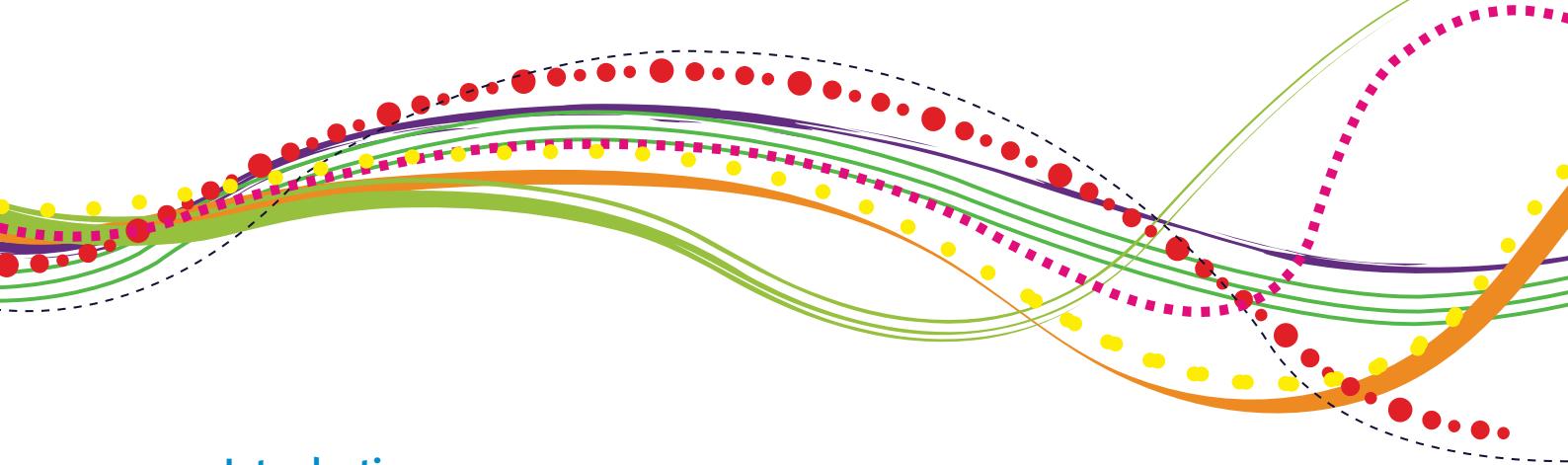
Each section provides practical advice and information for health care providers which is designed to answer some of the more common questions about Sikh patients and the religious practices of Sikhism that affect health care. The handbook also provides links to further information and contacts within the Sikh community of Maryland.

Health care providers work in an increasingly diverse environment. Those who display cross-cultural capabilities in their work use self-reflection, cultural understanding, contextual understanding, communication and collaboration to provide culturally appropriate, responsive and safe health care. This handbook aims to support health care providers by building their knowledge of the needs of Sikh patients.

The **Health Care Providers' Handbook on Sikh Patients** was written under the guidance of an advisory committee comprising:

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A special thanks to Ishani Chowdhury (Montgomery County Asian Pacific American Advisory Group) for her work on this book in adapting it for the State of Maryland.



Introduction

Maryland is a culturally and religiously diverse state.

There are between 250,000 to 500,000 Sikhs in the United States, with Maryland among one of its many culturally rich and religiously diverse states.¹ While majority of Sikhs in the US are from South Asia, there is also a growing population of Sikhs among Caucasian and African American communities.

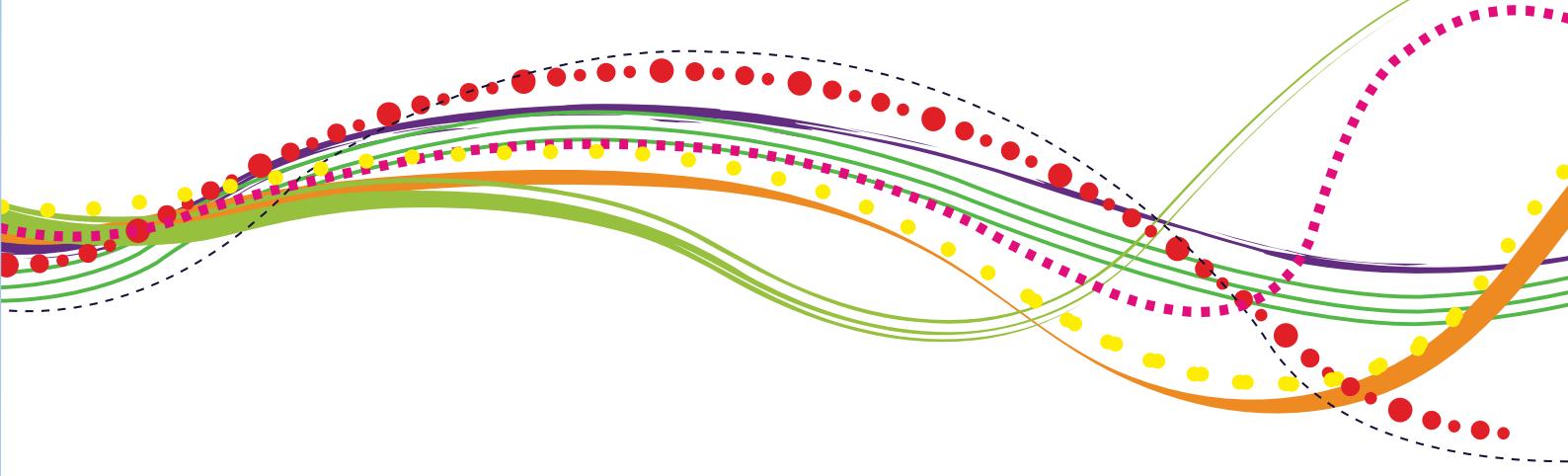
The increasing cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in Maryland means that to be safe, health services need to be culturally appropriate and responsive. Research indicates a strong link between low cultural competency, and poor quality health outcomes and significant risks.

Personal level of adherence

Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, was founded in the 15th Century in Punjab, Northern India. It is practiced in many countries around the world and its traditions and teachings are associated with the history, society and culture of the Punjab region in India and Pakistan.² Sikhs first settled in the United States in the late 1890's.

As Sikhism places responsibility on the individual to practice his or her religion, there are personal and cultural variations that make it difficult to provide definitive rules and regulations that apply to all Sikh patients. Because of these personal variations, it is important that health care providers consult the patient about their personal level of religious observance and practice.

However, Sikh patients should not be regarded as a 'special' group that require additional attention from health care providers. Due to the common Sikh beliefs of *karma* (the belief that every action has a consequence which is experienced in this or future lives) and reincarnation, Sikh patients may display acceptance of difficult circumstances and be inclined to comply with the instructions of health care providers.



1. Communication issues

The vast number of the Sikhs in the US are born overseas, with the majority of people coming from non-English speaking countries. Health care providers should be aware that many Sikh patients may not be proficient in English.

The other languages most widely spoken by Sikhs in Maryland are Punjabi and Hindi.

If a patient is assessed to have inadequate English comprehension levels, health care providers should engage a professional interpreter.

2. Interpreter services

All patients have a right to an interpreter. Most health care providers offer interpretation services. Please consult with your office for more information on access to interpretation services.



3. Patient rights

The American Hospital Association developed "A Patient's Bill of Rights" with the belief that it will add to more effective patient care and be supported by the hospital on behalf of the organizations, its medical staff, employees, and patients. However, it is not State law.

Health care involves a partnership between patients, doctors, and other health care professionals. Open communication, respect for personal and professional standards, and understanding of differences are important for the best possible patient care. Hospitals should:

- *Provide a base for understanding and respecting the rights and responsibilities of patients, their families, doctors and other care givers;
- *Respect the role of patients in decision making about treatment choices and other care; and
- *Be aware of cultural, racial, language, religious, age, gender and other differences as well as needs of people with disabilities.

Hospitals have many functions to perform, including treating injuries and diseases, health promotion and prevention, rehabilitation of patients, education of health professionals, patients and the community. These rights apply to patients from all cultures and faiths in the health care setting. All these activities should be conducted with concern for the values and dignity of patients.

For more information on the Patient's Bill of Rights, please visit: <https://www.marylandpatientrights.org/>

Sikh Symbols

Ik Onkar - One universal creator

Khanda - Represents the social and spiritual worlds. Sikhs are expected to be active participants in both.

4. Religious observance

Sikhism places the responsibility of practising religion on the individual. As a result, it is important that health care providers discuss religious observance needs with each patient.

Some topics that health care providers may wish to discuss with their patients include articles of faith; removal of hair; ablution, bathing and cleanliness; dietary needs; and prayer.

Articles of faith

- Baptized Sikhs are required to wear five articles of faith at all times. This applies to both men and women.
- These articles are known as the Five Kakkars or Five Ks – *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kanga* (wooden comb), *Kara* (steel bangle), *Kirpan* (short sword), and *Kachera* (undergarment)⁴.



Kesh – A Sikh's uncut hair signifies a commitment to the Sikh identity. For men it includes an untrimmed beard and moustache. The hair remains uncut because it is seen as a divine gift from God.



Kanga – The wooden comb is a symbol of keeping hair tidy.



Kara – The steel bangle signifies a bond of enduring love and commitment to the faith. The bangle, worn by both men and women, symbolizes a commitment to ethical conduct.



Kirpan – A small ceremonial sword that represents upholding justice for all.



Kachera – An undergarment, like shorts, for modesty.

- These articles should not be removed from a Sikh patient without permission.



- A Sikh may experience significant embarrassment if asked to remove these articles in public.
- A Sikh's turban is considered part of the articles of faith, and has similar religious significance. It is a symbol of a Sikh's honor and should be treated with the same level of respect as any of the five articles of faith.

Removal of hair

Hair should not be removed from any part of a Sikh patient's body without consent from the patient or their substitute decision-maker (this is usually a family member)⁵.

If a Sikh patient has impaired capacity and their condition is such that their life and health are at risk, and there is no time to obtain consent, medical treatment to avert the threat to life should be carried out without delay. The cutting of any hair should be avoided unless urgent or life-threatening medical treatment cannot be carried out without its removal.

If a Sikh patient has capacity for decision-making about health matters and refuses medical treatment on the basis of faith (because their hair can not be removed), these wishes must be followed and the patient informed they may be required to sign a waiver.

Sikh patients who feel strongly about refusing medical treatment on the basis that removing their hair is inconsistent with their faith should complete an Advance Health Directive.

All decision-making in relation to these situations must be documented thoroughly in the patient's record.

Bathing and cleanliness

Cleanliness is an important consideration for Sikhs.

- Sikhs follow a ritual of cleanliness and prayer each morning and evening which is set out in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh holy scriptures).
- The morning ritual includes showering, cleaning the teeth and mouth before prayer, and then eating.

- If a patient requires assistance to bathe, health care providers should be aware of the patient's preferred timing for this ritual.
- Washing hands before eating is important as cleanliness is observed during meals.
- Some Sikhs may prefer to wash with water after defecation.

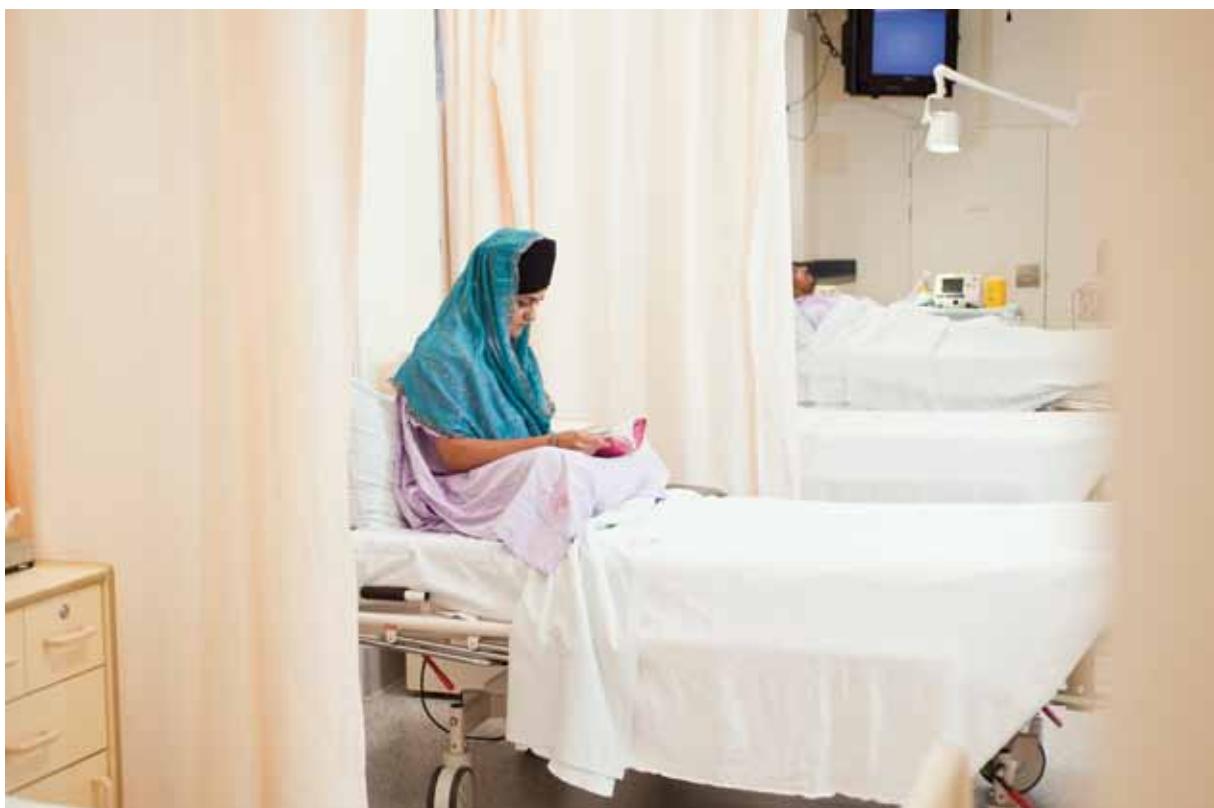
Dietary needs

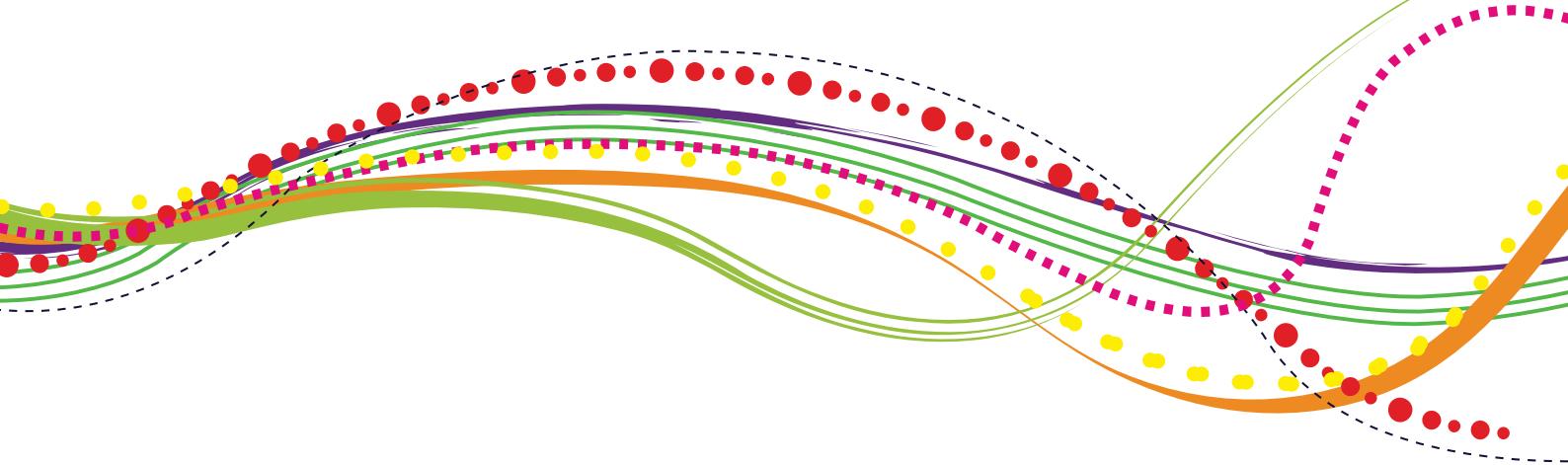
- Many Sikhs are strict vegetarians abstaining from all meat, fish and eggs. However, vegetarian Sikhs do consume dairy products.
- Some Sikhs do not follow a vegetarian diet. Non-vegetarian Sikhs may choose to not eat beef or pork⁶.
- Non-vegetarian Sikhs are not permitted to eat any meat that has been ritually slaughtered, and should not be offered halal or kosher meals⁷.
- A Sikh patient's family may wish to provide meals prepared at home.

Refer to section three for a table of foods suitable for vegetarian Sikhs.

Prayer

- Prayer is an important part of the daily routine of most Sikhs.
- Sikhs pray to seek God's help in recovering from illness. They remember *Waheguru* (a term for God) to obtain peace and ask for forgiveness.
- Sikh patients may wish to recite or listen to *Gurbani* (sacred hymns) which are enshrined in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* or narrated by the Gurus.
- Sikh patients may request for *Kirtan* (sacred hymns) to be played at the bedside.
- Prayers are usually said at dawn before breakfast, in the afternoon before sunset, and at night before sleep.
- Prayer can be recited in any location, including in bed or in hospital prayer rooms.
- Sikh patients may wish to have a prayer book with them when in the hospital. The prayer book is usually covered with a piece of cloth and should be kept in a clean place beside the bed. Hands should be washed before handling any prayer book.





- Many Sikhs have a strong belief that prayer and faith are important elements of curing illnesses of the body and mind⁷.

5. Sikh names

- Sikh men take the last (or middle) name Singh (meaning "lion") and Sikh women take the last (or middle) name Kaur (meaning "princess").
- Some Sikhs choose to include a family name in addition to, or instead of, Singh or Kaur.
- Sikh first names are not gender specific.
- The surname Singh does not necessarily indicate that someone is of the Sikh faith.

6. Decision making

A Sikh patient's family may have a strong influence on decision making relating to health matters, including informed consent to various medical procedures.

7. Administration of medicines

Traditional medicines and remedies

Sikhs may use a variety of traditional medicines (i.e. Homeopathy or Ayurvedic remedies) often in conjunction with Western medicine.

Herb and plant products have traditionally played an important role in treating illnesses in India and continue to feature prominently today, including in communities in America.

Suitability of medicines

Some medicines may not be suitable for Sikh patients because they contain alcohol or are of animal origin.

Health care providers should inform patients about the origins of their proposed medication if it is derived from animals and no suitable synthetic alternative

exists. Patients should be encouraged to make informed decisions regarding their treatment.

The manufacturer's product information gives details about the composition of the medicine (i.e. listing the active and inactive constituents/ingredients) and provides a description of how the medicine was produced (e.g. whether manufacture of the product included exposure to animal derived materials).

8. Clinical examination and procedures

- Health care providers should ask for permission from the patient or their family before removing any of the five articles of faith, including removing hair from any part of the body, or a Sikh's turban⁵.
- Sikh patients (both men and women) may prefer to be examined by a health care provider of their own gender.
- Invasive examinations may need to be carefully explained, particularly where a same-sex clinician cannot be accommodated.
- Sikh patients may wish to have a family member present during any clinical examination.

9. Maternity services

- As soon as practical after childbirth, a family member may wish to recite a prayer.
- As part of the ceremony, the infant is given a few drops of holy water and a prayer is recited.
- Sikh mothers may wish to keep the five articles of faith on at all times during childbirth. This may require keeping the Kachera (undergarment) on one leg.
- Shaving of the perineum may not be acceptable.
- Infants are usually named soon after birth following a ceremony at the gurdwara or at home.
- Male infants are not circumcised.

10. Community health services

- Tobacco products, other intoxicants or meat products should not be taken into Sikh homes.
- Sikhs may prefer for shoes to be removed when entering a home.
- If this is not possible for Workplace Health and Safety reasons, alternatives should be explored.

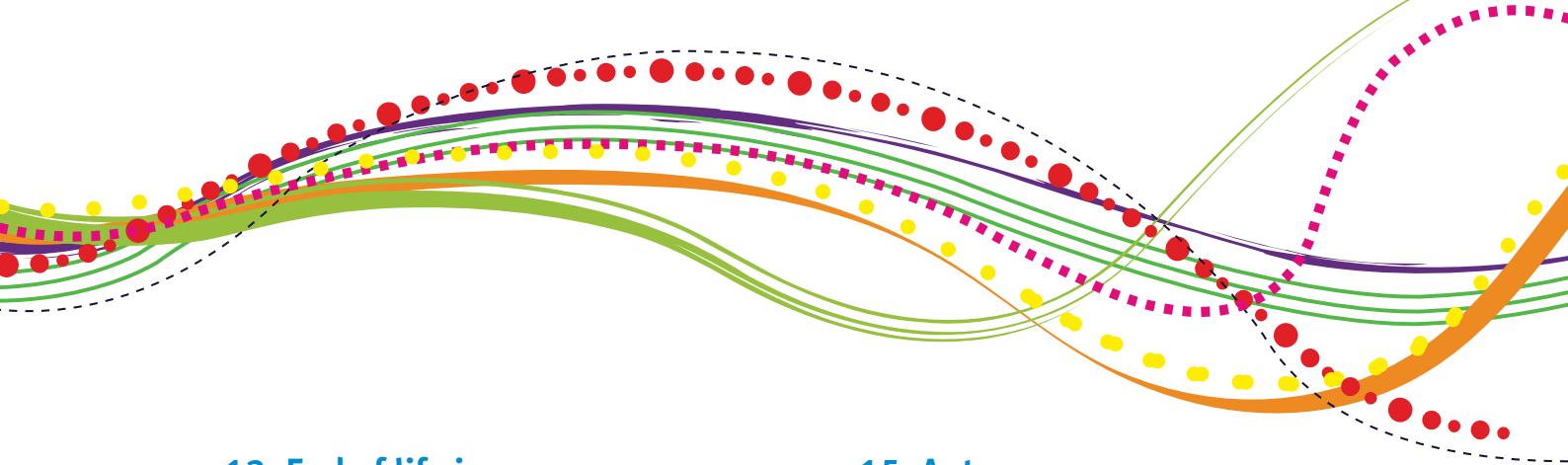
11. Visiting arrangements

- Visiting the sick is an important cultural and religious practice for Sikhs⁴.
- Sikh patients may have large numbers of visitors, including those from outside their immediate family.

12. Care of family and older persons

- It is traditionally the responsibility of children to care for aging parents⁶.
- Older Sikhs may live together with extended family.
- Sikhism encourages family members to take an active role in the care of family members.
- Health care providers should take this into account when developing care plans or suggesting nursing or residential care.





13. End of life issues

- The sanctity of life is considered paramount in Sikhism⁸.
- Sikhs believe that all living beings have an eternal soul which passes through successive cycles of birth and rebirth⁹.
- Health care providers should include family members when discussing advance care planning with the patient.
- Sikhs may wish to recite prayers or read scriptures when nearing death. Family and friends may wish to be present.
- Holy Water from the Gurdwara (Sikh temple) may be given to the patient to sip.

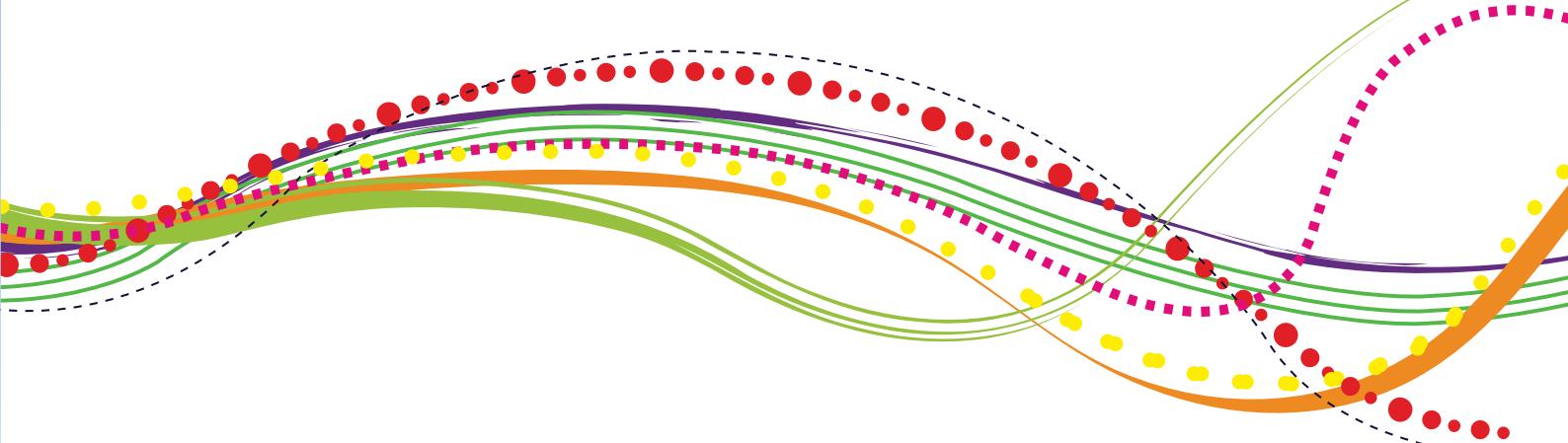
Refer to section three for a list of Sikh organizations.

14. Deceased patients

- Health care providers should not remove the five articles of faith or the turban after death⁷.
- The patient's family should be advised if it is necessary to remove these items.
- A Sikh's body should be covered with clean linen.
- The family may wish to wash and clothe the body immediately after death.
- The family may wish to move the body to a funeral home for cremation as soon as possible.
- The family may wish to wait for a close relative or a *Granthi* (Sikh priest) to arrive before moving the body.

15. Autopsy

- There are no Sikh religious objections to autopsy⁸. However, as no hair on the body should be cut or removed, it is usually requested that an autopsy is not performed unless required under law.
- If an autopsy is required, the five articles of faith, including hair from any part of the body, should not be removed without consent from family.



1. Food beliefs

Sikh dietary practices can vary depending on the individual's beliefs and customs.

Many Sikhs follow a strict vegetarian diet, abstaining from consuming any fish, meat or eggs. Vegetarian Sikhs do consume dairy products, however, vegan Sikhs may not.

Sikhs who are not vegetarian may choose to abstain from eating pork or beef. However, all Sikhs are prohibited from eating any meat that has been ritually slaughtered including *halal* or *kosher* meats⁴.

Sikhs are also prohibited from consuming alcohol, tobacco or other intoxicants⁵ and do not fast for any religious reasons⁴.

Refer to section three for a table of foods suitable for vegetarian Sikhs.

2. Holy days

Sikhs do not observe a specific day of worship, although communities may choose to congregate at the Gurdwara (temple) on a specific day.

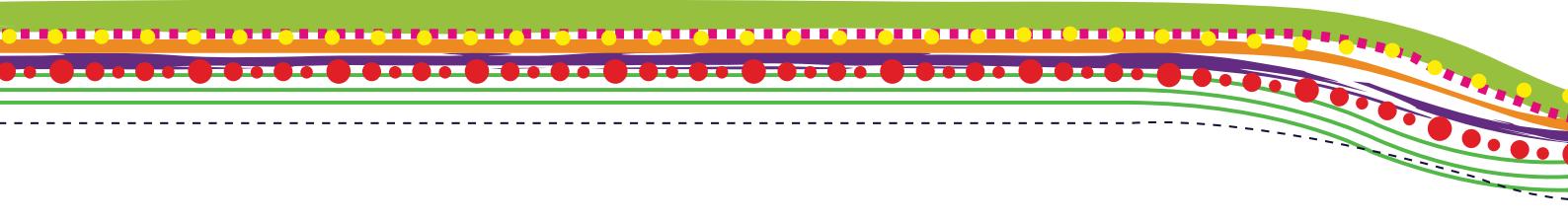
Sikhs do observe a number of holy days and festivals throughout the year.

3. Dress

One of the five articles of faith for Sikhs is the *Kachera* (an undergarment similar to drawstring shorts), which must be worn by baptized men and women at all times.

If the *Kachera* is required to be removed for examination or treatment purposes, permission should be sought from the patient or accommodation should be made to allow them to be kept on one leg.





Sikhs are also required to wear a turban at all times. The turban is a symbol of a Sikh's honor and is worn as a covering for one of the articles of faith – *Kesh* (uncut hair). A smaller turban called a *patka* can be worn when in hospital.

If it is necessary to remove the turban during medical treatment, an alternative head covering should be provided. A surgical cap can be worn over the turban or *patka* if necessary.

A turban should be treated with respect and never placed on the floor or with shoes.

Women may choose to cover their hair with a turban or a scarf. These items should be treated with the same respect.

4. Mental health and/or cognitive dysfunction

- Sikhs believe in the efficacy of prayer and meditation to alleviate depression and anxiety.
- Sikhs with mental illness are not discouraged to participate in spiritual activities and gatherings at the Gurdwara (temple).
- Sikhism does not support the belief that cognitive dysfunction and mental illness are caused by spirit possession or as a punishment for breaching religious principles. Sikhs are encouraged to seek medical treatment.
- Although Sikhs should not attach a stigma to cognitive dysfunction or mental illness, some Sikhs may believe that mental illness is caused by external factors such as the *evil eye* (*jado-tuna*) or possession by demons or evil spirits.
- Family members may attempt to hide mental illness from the community or other relatives due to possible stigma.

5. Transplants, organ donation and blood transfusions

Sikhism supports the donation and transplantation of organs⁶ and allows for blood transfusions.

Sikhs are encouraged to help others in need and donating organs is considered a noble gesture.

6. Sexual and reproductive health

Contraception

Sikhs are permitted to use contraception¹⁰

Abortion

Sikhs believe the fetus to be alive immediately upon conception and abortion is not permitted unless there is a serious threat to the mother's life¹⁰.

Abortion is not permitted on the basis of family planning.

Assisted reproductive technologies

Sikhs are permitted to use assisted reproductive technologies only during the span of a marriage⁵.

It is preferred for the husband to provide the sperm⁵. However, if this is not possible, a donor can be used depending on the couple's preference.

7. Death and dying

Sikhs are encouraged to accept death and illness as part of life and the will of God.

Sikh beliefs allows Sikh patients to be accepting of death⁶.

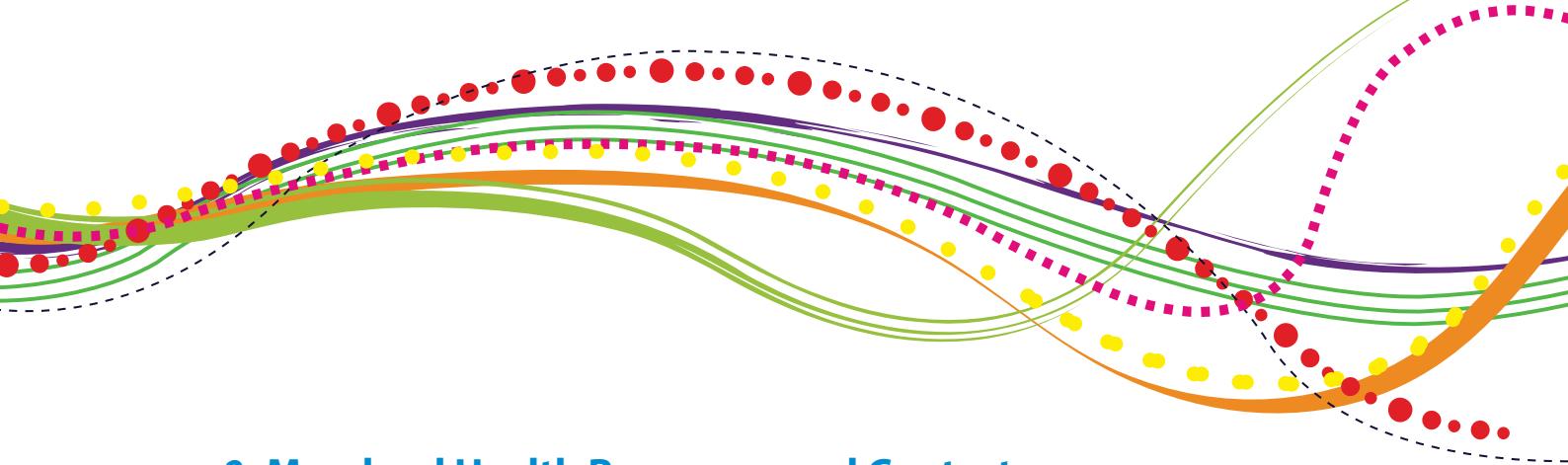
Family members should be consulted where the situation requires treatment to be provided to prolong the final stages of a terminal illness. If it is acceptable to the patient's family, life supporting systems may be disconnected. However, suicide and euthanasia are forbidden because life is considered to be precious¹¹.

Grieving and bereavement

Some Sikhs believe that excessive grief can interfere with the peaceful departure of the soul⁵.

1. Sikh organizations

Sikh Association of Baltimore	3423 Chapman Road Randallstown, MD 21133 410-521-7568
Guru Nanak Foundation of America	12917 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring, MD 20904 301-384-2133 www.gnfa.org
Guru Gobind Singh Foundation	13814 Travilah Rd Rockville, MD 20850 301-838-3004 www.ggsfusa.com
Baltimore Sikh Society	1731 Rita Rd. Dundalk, MD 21222 410-284-1000
Kaur Foundation	https://www.kaurfoundation.org/



2. Maryland Health Resources and Contacts

Asian American Health Initiative

1401 Rockville Pike, 3rd Floor
Rockville, MD 20850
240-777-4517
<https://aahiinfo.org/>

Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Service

1301 Piccard Dr.
Rockville, MD 20850
HHSmail@montgomerycountymd.gov
<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/hhs/>

Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities

201 W. Preston Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
(410)767-6500 or 1-877-463-3464
<https://health.maryland.gov/mhhd/Pages/home.aspx>

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244
<https://www.cms.gov/>

Maryland Access Point

301 W. Preston Street
Suite 1007
Baltimore, MD 21201
410-767-1100
<https://aging.maryland.gov/Pages/maryland-access-point.aspx>

Maryland Department of Aging

301 W. Preston Street
Suite 1007
Baltimore, MD 21201
<https://aging.maryland.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

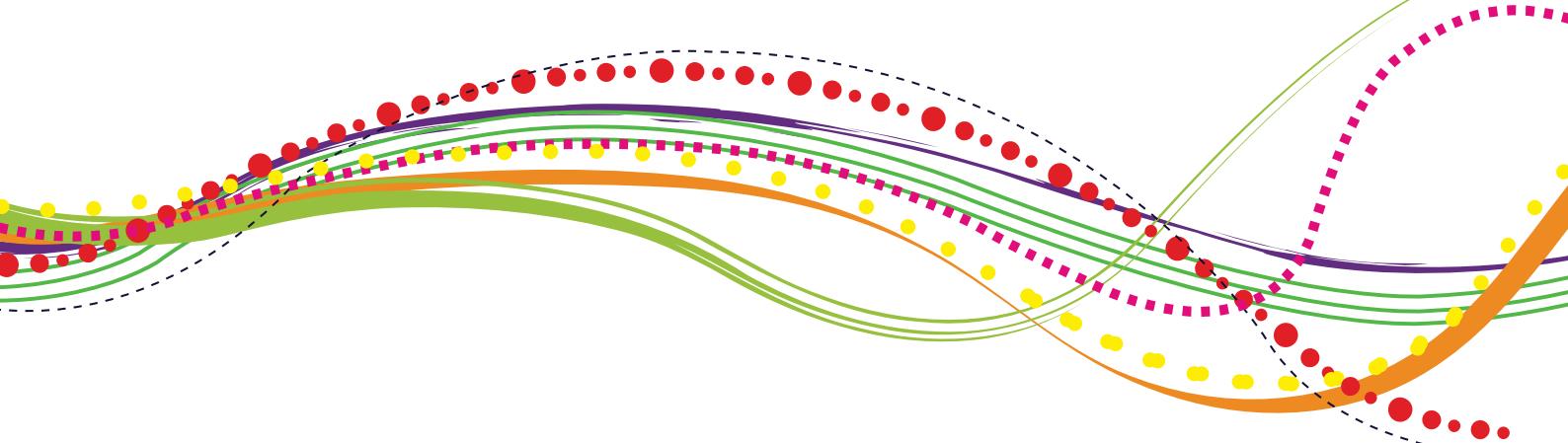
3. Foods suitable for Vegetarian Sikhs

Some Sikhs follow a strict vegetarian diet. The following table outlines foods which are suitable for vegetarian Sikhs, as well as many common non-vegetarian additives and ingredients that may be found in these foods. These non-vegetarian additives need to be identified as they would make these seemingly vegetarian foods unsuitable.

Sikhs who do not follow a vegetarian diet may eat meat from any animal, but are prohibited from eating any meat which has been ritually slaughtered, including *halal* and *kosher* meat products. However, some Sikhs may choose to not eat beef or pork.

Sikhs are also prohibited from consuming alcohol and foods made using alcohol. This includes products such as bitters, vanilla essence and foods cooked or preserved using alcohol.

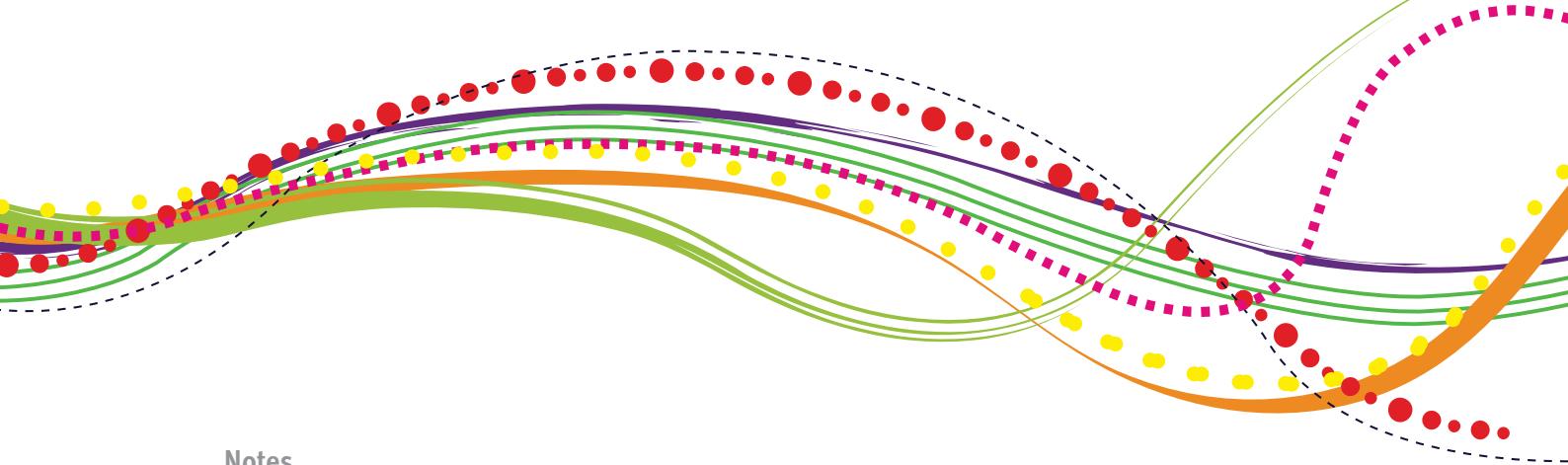




Foods suitable for vegetarian Sikhs	Ingredients and additives that may be found in these foods that would make them unsuitable if present (food becomes non-vegetarian)
Milk and milk products	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cream • Cheese • Yogurt • Butter • Coconut milk and other milk substitutes • Ice cream • Milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gelatin • Animal based thickener (e.g. chitin) • Animal-based emulsifiers (e.g. animal or egg-based lecithin) • Animal-based food coloring (e.g. cochineal/carmine) • Enzymes (e.g. lipase, pepsin, animal rennet)
Fruits and vegetables	
All fruits and vegetables including beans, lentils and nuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruits and vegetables prepared with animal fats, gelatin or tallow
Bread and cereals	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bread, cakes, biscuits and cereal products made without egg or animal fats • Pasta and pastry made without egg • Noodles made without egg • Rice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eggs • Pastry brushed with egg whites • Animal-based emulsifiers (e.g. animal or egg-based lecithin)
Fats and oils	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All vegetable oils • Butter • Margarine made using vegetable oil • Mayonnaise made without egg • Ghee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal fats • Lard dripping • Suet • Egg • Fish oils
Beverages	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juices and cordials • Tea and coffee • Soft drinks, mineral and soda water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gelatin • Animal-based food colouring (e.g. cochineal/carmine)
Soups and sauces	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All soups and sauces made with vegetables and vegetable stock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal stock/fats • Fish sauce • Worcestershire sauce
Desserts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All desserts made without eggs or other animal products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal fats • Animal based emulsifiers • Eggs • Gelatin
Other	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spices, pickles, chutney • Jam, honey, sugar • Vegetable-based gelatin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gelatin • Animal based food colouring (e.g. cochineal/carmine) • Enzymes (e.g. lipase, pepsin, animal rennet)

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Notes

