

World Sikh Organization of Canada

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WORLD SIKH ORGANIZATION
OF CANADA

Providing Competent & Religiously Sensitive Care to People of the Sikh Faith



A handbook for health care providers

This handbook will provide you with information on the Sikh faith, and the important values, beliefs, and practices to take into account when providing care.

For further information, contact:

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Acknowledgment :

This guide is based on the Fraser Health Authority's (FHA) *Providing Diversity Competent Care to People of the Sikh Faith: A handbook for health care providers*. The WSO worked with the FHA in developing the guide in 2013.

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Information on the Sikh Faith

Overview of the Faith

History

- The Sikh faith began in the 15th Century in the Punjab
- Sikhs believe in equality and social justice for all
- *Sikh* can be translated as “disciple/student” in Punjabi
- The founder of the Sikh faith is **Guru Nanak** (1469-1539)
- *Guru* can be translated to “Spiritual Teacher”
- There are 10 Gurus in total followed by the eternal Guru, the Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib



Guru Nanak is the first **Guru** (of ten) of the Sikh faith. You might find his picture in the homes of Sikh families, or perhaps by the bedsides of patients/clients/residents. **Guru Nanak** is not worshipped in the Sikh faith.

Language

The vast majority the Sikh population is from the province of Punjab, India. Thus, the languages that are most spoken in the Sikh population are:

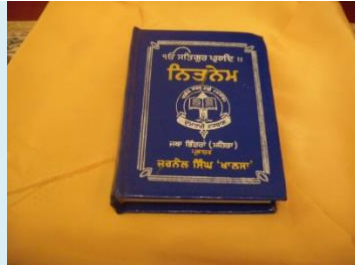
- Punjabi
- English

Basic Beliefs

- The Sikh faith believes in One God that is present within all of creation
- **There are 3 Principles of Sikhism:**
 1. Earn an honest living
 2. Share earnings with others/community
 3. Always remember and meditate on God

Religious Scripture

- The religious book/scripture in the Sikh faith is the **Sri Guru Granth Sahib**
- It is a compilation of the writings of the Sikh Gurus and other divinely inspired individuals and is treated with veneration by followers
- It is considered the final and eternal Guru of the Sikh faith
- Usually, a **smaller version of the scripture** is found by the bedside of patients/clients/residents – it is called a **gutka**



Creative Commons Photos by Hari Singh (Flickr)

The **gutka** is a small compendium of Sikh prayers and scriptures. It is usually wrapped in a cloth and treated with respect.



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOL

If you need to move the gutka, make sure your hands are clean.

The gutka is treated with incredible respect, and is usually placed in a clean and elevated place. It should not be put on the floor, near the washroom, or underneath other books/magazines.

Patients/clients/residents of the Sikh faith may read the hymns aloud from the gutka.

Religious Observance

Levels of religious observance vary within the Sikh population, as with any religious population. The following are religious observances that are followed by initiated or practicing Sikhs. Again, it must be emphasized that not all people who consider themselves Sikh will follow the religious observances in the same way or to the same degree. **Have a conversation with your patient/client/resident to understand what is important to him/her to help you provide culturally sensitive care.**

Appearance:

- Sikhs **may or may not** have a distinctive appearance or wear all of the Articles of Faith (see below for more details)
 - Observant Sikhs will have long, uncut hair and a Sikh men will have a beard.
 - Sikh men and many Sikh women may wear a turban as well. Observant Sikh women may also wear a head scarf.

Prayer:

- Observant Sikhs observe the **three daily prayer times** (see below for more details)

Ethical and Social Conduct:

- Sikhs may or may not abide by the ethical and social conduct outlined by the faith (e.g. ethical rules of conduct, the teaching of the Gurus, the wearing the of the Five Articles of Faith)

Dietary Restrictions:

- Sikhs may or may not adhere to all or some of the dietary restrictions outlined by the faith (see below for more details)



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOL

Some **children** are raised in a household where the commitments of an Initiated Sikh (e.g. wearing the Articles of Faith) are followed. When providing care for children, we use the rule “parents know best”, if you are in doubt about providing care in a certain way, always ask the parents.

Initiated Sikhs

Initiated Sikhs

- An Initiated Sikh is someone who has committed themselves to the Sikh faith
- After being initiated, Sikhs adhere to a formal **ethical social conduct** including some **dietary restrictions** and wearing **Articles of Faith** (explained below)
- **Both** men and women can be Initiated
- The Initiation Ceremony takes place when someone fully comprehends the implications of being initiated, and there is no age limit for being initiated

The Five Articles of Faith

- The Five Articles of Faith are typically never removed from a follower's body, and patients will likely expect to wear the articles during their hospitalization/stay in the health facility, *even when sleeping or bathing*
- All Articles of Faith must be treated with clean hands and not put near shoes, washrooms or on the floor
- If removal of any of the Articles of Faith is absolutely required for a medical procedure or intervention, **always ask for permission and provide a respectful explanation**

Example:

Mr. Singh is scheduled for an MRI of his abdomen for which he is asked to remove any metal objects. You, as his nurse, observe that Mr. Singh is wearing two Articles of Faith - his *kirpan* (small sword) and *kara* (iron bracelet), and they are made of metal. You explain to Mr. Singh and his family that metal objects cannot be taken into the MRI area/room and ask that they be removed for the scan. (If Mr. Singh is using an interpreter, have the interpreter explain this to him as well).

“Mr. Singh, unfortunately it is very dangerous and unallowable to have metal objects in the MRI area/room. To have the MRI done, you will have to remove your kirpan and kara. We can keep it in a safe and clean place for you, and give it back to you as soon as the procedure is done. Is that OK?”



Kesh – Hair (Covered with a turban or scarf)

What is it?

- Kesh is defined as uncut hair for both men and women.
- All the hair on the body are considered to be kesh, from head to toe
- For men, kesh includes an untrimmed beard and moustache.
- Many Sikh men may tuck or tie their beards
- The kesh on the head are covered by a turban or scarf.

Why?

- Hair is considered a gift from God, and uncut hair represents the acceptance of God's will and creation as perfect

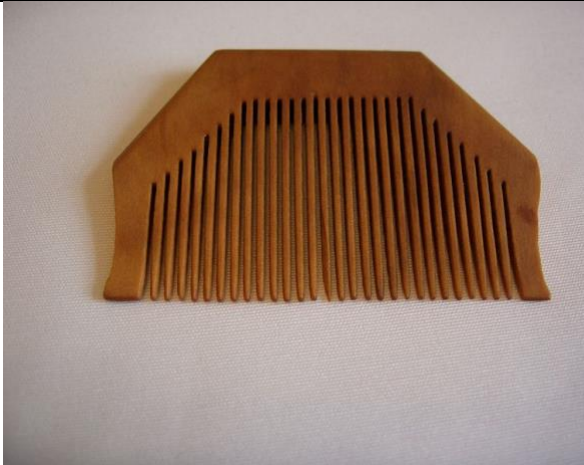


IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOLS

- A patient must be consulted and give **explicit permission prior to trimming, cutting or shaving any hair from any part of the body** (even for routine procedures such as taking blood)
- The turban is **not** like a hat – privacy must be given for removing or tying it
- There are different styles of turbans and often a smaller turban is worn underneath the larger turban. Touching the turban without permission may be seen as disrespectful
- People who wear a turban are not necessarily Initiated Sikhs

Tied Hair – Potential Effects on Swallowing and Breathing

- Sikh males might care for their hair by running a string from under the jaw, around the ears, and tying the ends together on the top of the head where it is placed under the turban
- The string may be tighter for larger beards, and may impair a patient's/client's/resident's ability to swallow big portions of food, their ability to open their mouth widely, which in turn, could restrict breathing
- Stay aware of the potential problems associated with the practice of string tying – **adjusting the string may provide a simple solution to a patient's breathing or swallowing problems** (you can ask patient/family to do this).



Kanga - Comb

What is it?

- A wooden comb is used to properly groom and care for the hair (kesh)
- This is worn in the hair, above the top-knot of men and above the bun or plait in women (under the turban)

Why?

- The comb represents hygiene and ridding oneself of impurities and what is morally undesirable



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOLS

- Sikhs may comb their hair with the kanga two times a day
- Sikhs may keep the hair from the comb after they have finished brushing so that it can be disposed of respectfully (not thrown in the garbage)



Kirpan - Small Sword

What is it?

- The kirpan is made of steel or iron and secured in a belt across torso, underneath clothing, or in plain view
- It is worn **at all times** by Initiated Sikhs – at home, at work, sleeping or bathing

Why?

- The kirpan signifies the duty of a Sikh to stand up against injustice
- It represents spiritual power and is not to be used as a weapon



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOLS

- The kirpan cannot be replaced by wood or rubber replicas
- Have a discussion with the patient/client if the kirpan has to be removed for medical purposes (e.g. MRI)
- In some situations (i.e. CT scan), the kirpan can be held to the side by the patient and the image can be taken





Kachera - Undershorts

What is it?

- The undershorts are unisex cotton breeches that resemble boxer shorts with a drawstring

Why?

- It represents chastity/sexual morality



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOLS

- The undershorts may be worn at all times, including during bathing
- Women during childbirth may want to tie the undershorts to one of their legs
- Patients may request that the kacherra be tied to one of their legs during surgery



Kara - Bracelet

What is it?

- The kara is an iron or steel bangle worn on the wrist

Why?

- It is a reminder of the Sikh's bond with the God and the Guru and to perform righteous deeds



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOLS

- Have a discussion with your patient/client if the bracelet needs to be removed for medical purposes
- It may not be possible to remove the bracelet because the hand no longer slips through. In such an instance, work with your team and the patient to determine what accommodations can be made. Examples include:
 - Surgery: the bracelet can be taped off
 - CT Scan: The hand with the bracelet can be moved to the side

Prayers

- Prayer is an important part of the daily routine of many Sikhs
- Sikhs may pray to seek God's help in recovering from illness. They remember God's name to obtain peace. This may take the form of meditation on Naam
- Prayers occur **three times a day** (usually before dawn, before breakfast, in the evening at sunset, and at night before sleep) with the **gutka**
- The prayers involve recitation of verses from the Sikh scriptures
- Sikhs may not eat until after their morning prayer is completed
- Prayers can occur individually or in congregation
- Prayers can take place in any location, including in bed or in designated prayer rooms
- Bathing or ablution is done before prayers

Ablution, bathing & Cleanliness

- Cleanliness is an important consideration for Sikhs
- Sikhs may follow a ritual of cleanliness and prayer each morning and evening
- The morning ritual includes showering, cleaning the teeth and mouth before prayer and then eating
- Washing occurs before the other prayers
- Washing the hands before eating is important as cleanliness is observed during meals
- Sikhs most often wash with water after defecation (e.g. bidets are used)

Place of Worship

- The **Gurdwara** is the community centre and place of worship for people of the Sikh faith Diet
- Many Sikhs are **lacto-vegetarian**, meaning that they abstain from all meat, fish, and eggs, but do consume dairy products
- Some Sikhs do not follow a vegetarian diet. Non-vegetarian Sikhs may still choose not to eat beef for cultural reasons.
- Non-vegetarian Sikhs are not permitted to eat any meat that has been ritually slaughtered and so should not be offered halal or kosher meals
- A Sikh patient's family may wish to provide meals prepared at home

Note to health care workers

- A family or friend may bring "parshaad", a sacramental food that is made in the Gurdwara (made of sugar, flour, and clarified butter), to the patient/client/resident. If eating this food is medically contraindicated, please let the family or patient know, or suggest adjustments (e.g. eating only a small amount)
- Sikhs may not eat with their head uncovered and may want to have their heads covered while they eat (e.g. with a turban or scarf)



IMPORTANT PRACTICAL TOOLS

- If a patient requires assistance to bathe, healthcare providers should be aware of the patient's preferred timing for this ritual
- If bathing is medically contraindicated, discuss this with the patient and ask if it is ok to just wash the face and hands before prayer

Diet

Table 1: Foods Suitable for Vegetarian Sikhs

([Note to health care workers](#): Please have a conversation with your patient to see their personal dietary needs and restrictions, as all might not adhere to the list below)

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 colouring (e.g. cochineal/caramine) • Enzymes (e.g. lipase, pepsin, animal rennet)
Fruits and vegetables	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All fruits and vegetables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruits and vegetables prepared with animal fats, gelatin or tallow
Alternatives to Meat	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beans • Lentils • Nuts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eggs • Beans, lentils and nuts 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/caramine)
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)

Health Related Subjects

The following are generalizations and may not apply to individual Sikh patients. So whenever you read “Sikh”, know that it means “for many Sikh people...”

Modesty and Gender Interactions

- Modesty is highly valued
- The patient/client/resident may prefer to be attended by a same-sex healthcare staff
- If an Interpreter is needed, a same-sex Interpreter may be preferred

Family and Living Arrangements

- Usually, families have a strong presence in the lives of Sikh people
- Culturally, households are sometimes joint-family systems, consisting of parents, grandparents, children, spouses or other relatives
- Culturally, the elders are considered the top of the family hierarchy
- Culturally, the elderly usually do not live alone, although this trend may be changing due to the fact that lifestyles are changing in Canada (family structure and work schedules may result in family members not being able to stay at home to take care of family members)

Decision Making

- Sikhs view the needs of an individual in the greater context of the family
- A Sikh patient’s family may have a strong influence on decision making relating to health matters, including informed consent to various medical procedures

Note to healthcare workers:

- Decision-making for health-related issues may include the patient’s/client’s/resident’s family, friends, dependents, or those whom they are dependent upon
- It is important to have a conversation with your patient/client/resident as to how they would like decisions to be made in a one-to-one conversation to ensure that the patient’s wishes are being understood without outside influences
- In the case where there is a language barrier between the patient/client/resident and the healthcare provider, have this one-to-one conversation with an Interpreter present

Some questions you could ask are:

- How would you like decisions to be made in regards to your care and/or treatment?
- What are you worried about in terms of decision-making when it comes to your care?
- Would you like family input in the decision-making process?

Administration of Medicines

Traditional medicines and remedies

- Sikhs may use a variety of traditional medicines and remedies, often in conjunction with Canadian medicine
- Herb and plant products, in addition to traditional treatments such as Ayurveda and homeopathy, have traditionally played an important role in treating illnesses in India and continue to be used today, including in communities in Canada

Medication Restrictions

- There are no religious rules affecting medication, although vegetarian Sikhs may want to avoid medications containing animal, fish or egg product

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 the turban or scarf
- The removal of the five articles of faith should be done in private (e.g. allowing the patient/client/resident to remove their turban in a private setting)
- Sikh patients may wish to have a **family member present** during any clinical examination
- Sikh patients (both men and women) may prefer to be examined by a health care provider of their **own gender**
- Culturally, sexual health information is considered very private and may not be discussed with health care providers, or in front of family members, and thus may make getting a complete medical history difficult. Try to have this particular discussion in private (**without family present**), and if needed, with an Interpreter of the same gender as the patient/client/resident
- The need for invasive examinations may need to be carefully explained, particularly where a same-sex clinician cannot be accommodated

Maternity services

The Mother

- Sikh mothers may wish to keep the **five articles of faith** on at all times during childbirth. This may require keeping the Kachera (undershorts) on one leg (or tied to one leg)
- Shaving of the perineum may not be acceptable – ask for consent
- Culturally, some Sikh mothers might expect a lying-in period of up to 40 days following childbirth (some families may seek to be secluded for up to 40 days after giving birth, however this is a cultural practice rather than a religious belief).

The Child

- Infants are usually named soon after birth following a ceremony at the Gurdwara or at home
- Male infants are **not** circumcised
- **Avoid cutting an infant's hair**. If hair needs to be cut for medical reasons, always ask permission first from the parents. Be aware that this may cause significant spiritual distress.

The Family

- As soon as practical after childbirth, a family member may wish to perform a special ceremony
- As part of the ceremony, the infant is given a few drops of sugar water and a prayer is recited
- In some Sikh families, the father will expect to be able to whisper the *Mul Mantra* (Guru Nanak's first poetic statement) into the ear of the new infant (if the father is not present during labour, it is advisable to keep him updated on the progress of the labour to ensure that he will be able to carry out this wish as soon as possible after birth)

Community Health Services

- Tobacco products, alcohol or meat products should not be taken into Sikh homes
- Sikhs may prefer for shoes to be removed when entering a home

Transplants, organ donation and blood transfusions

- Sikhism supports the donation and transplantation of organs and allows for blood transfusions
- Sikhs are encouraged to help others in need and donating organs is considered a noble gesture

Sexual and reproductive health

Contraception

- **Beliefs with respect to contraception vary within the Sikh community**
- **Some Sikhs do use contraception**
- **Many Initiated Sikhs will not use contraception**

Abortion

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

Visiting Arrangements

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

Care of family and older persons

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

Care for the Dying

- A dying Sikh may receive comfort from reciting hymns from the scripture (alone or with a group of family members and/or friends)
- Hymns may be played at the bedside 24/7 (and has occurred throughout the acute care setting)
- Extended family and friends may visit as a sign of respect
- Relatives or family may contact the Gurdwara (or Spiritual Care may contact them if needed)

Beliefs about Death and Dying

- **Reincarnation** is a central tenet of Sikhism (Sikhs believe that all living beings have an eternal soul which passes through successive cycles of birth and rebirth until the soul once again merges with God, through meditation on naam.)
- Sikhs are encouraged to accept death and illness as part of life and the will of God
- Due to the Sikh belief in the doctrine of **karma**, some Sikh patients may be accepting of death
- Family members should be consulted where the situation required 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
- Suicide and euthanasia are forbidden in Sikhism

Long-Term Life Support

- Long-term life support is a personal or family choice

DNR Orders

- There are usually no religious objections to DNR orders

Consulting in Advance about End of Life

- Whenever possible, caregivers are advised to consult in advance with the family about their expectations for the care and handling of the deceased. This is to help avoid some of the distress that can occur for both family and providers when last minute accommodations need to be attempted.

Deceased patients

- Health care workers **should not remove the five articles of faith** (including the turban or the scarf) after death
- The patient's family should be asked if it is necessary to remove these items
- Although staff should always ask, it is usually okay for non-Sikhs to touch a dead body
- A Sikh's body should be covered with clean linen and shrouded
- 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 (with the Five Articles of Faith intact)
- The family will immerse the ashes in a running body of water. Some will take the ashes to a river in India

Autopsy

- There are no Sikh religious objections to autopsy. However, as no hair on the body should be cut or removed, it is usually requested that an autopsy is not performed unless required by law
- If an autopsy is required, every effort should be made so that the **five articles of faith, including hair from any part of the body, should not be removed**



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