



SIKH PATIENT'S GUIDE FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS



OVERVIEW

This booklet aims to provide some insight into the beliefs and practices of Sikhism and how knowledge of those beliefs can greatly benefit the health care of any Sikh patient. However, as with any belief system, variation exists in how people practice their faith so it is **ALWAYS** better to **ASK FIRST** before doing or assuming anything.

SIKHS AT A GLANCE

- Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest religion with 25 million adherents worldwide.
- Sikhism is a distinct religion, separate from Hinduism and Islam.
- Sikhs believe in one God, equality, freedom of religion, and community service.
- Sikhs cover their uncut hair with a turban – the turban represents a Sikh's commitment to their faith, equality, and justice.
- Sikhs have been in the U.S. for over 100 years – there are approximately 750,000 Sikhs in the U.S. today.



ARTICLES OF FAITH - THE 5 K'S

It is mandatory for all initiated Sikhs, called the Khalsa, to wear it at all times. It is encouraged for non-initiated Sikhs to wear as well.



KARA
(Steel Bracelet)



KESH
(Uncut Hair)



KANGA
(Wooden Comb)



KACCHERA
(Under-shorts)



KIRPAN
(Religious Sword)

CONCERNS FOR ALL PHYSICIANS

HANDLING THE 5 K'S (ARTICLES OF FAITH)

- Sensitivity: Sikhs, especially those that are baptized, have an intimate relationship with their turban and 5 K's. As such, any request to handle any of these items should be done with a great deal of sensitivity and compassion. Be open to finding creative ways to allow a Sikh patient to keep them on his/her person at all times.
- Removal: If it is absolutely necessary to remove the turban or any of the 5 K's for ANY reason, inform the patient of the necessity and obtain consent. DO NOT attempt to forcibly remove them. If removed, place the article of faith either with the family or with the patient's belongings. DO NOT place it on the ground or with their shoes.
- Kirpan: It is not a weapon and should not be considered a security risk. If a kirpan must be removed, explain the reason, request the Sikh to remove it him or herself, and explain that the kirpan will be handled with respect.
- Kara: A Sikh may request that their kara remains on during surgery and be covered if necessary (as in handling a wedding ring). Other possibilities could include wearing it on the other wrist or pinning it to some portion of the patient's clothing. Please be accommodating if at all possible.
- Kesh (Uncut Hair): Much of a Sikh's identity comes from his/her Kesh, *uncut hair*. Removal for any reason is a serious issue and thus should not be taken lightly.



COMMON SIKH BELIEFS

- Philosophy: Sikh patients may consider illness to be the will of God, but one has to make the effort to get well, which includes medical treatments/procedures.
- Shaving/Hair Removal: If it is absolutely necessary to shave or remove hair from ANY part of the patient's body for any reason, please inform the patient, explain why it is necessary, and obtain consent. Avoid hair removal at all costs. This applies to both male and female patients.
- Language Barrier: Many Sikhs in the USA are new immigrants with their primary language being Punjabi, not English. Be mindful of the possible language barrier and take time in explaining diagnoses, procedures, treatments, and their side effects. Be prepared to have a Punjabi language translator if necessary.
- Same-sex physician: While Sikhism does not mandate patients having a same-sex physician, it may be strongly preferred. A sincere effort to accommodate this, especially if requested, is appreciated.
- Diet: Some Sikhs choose to be vegetarians while others do not. Any form of sacrificial meat (e.g. kosher, halal, etc.) or other religiously prepared food is strictly prohibited. Because dietary restrictions can vary from person to person, it is best to ask the patient first.
- Prayer Book: Patients may choose to bring a Gutka, a collection of Sikh daily prayers that may be wrapped in a small cloth. The Gutka is to be handled with respect, so it's best to consult the patient before handling it. Refrain from interrupting a praying patient for routine care.

SIKH VIEW ON COMMON ISSUES

- Blood transfusions are allowed.
- Assisted suicide/euthanasia are not encouraged, but palliative measures in the setting of terminal disease(s) are considered acceptable.
- Organ transplantation, both donating and receiving organs are permitted.
- An autopsy is permitted.
- Death/Dying: Dying Sikhs are generally comforted by family and friends who may recite hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. If family is not present, a reader from the local Gurdwara or Sikh community should be contacted.



- Funeral: Sikhs are usually cremated. The patient's family may choose to wash and clothe the body after death and prior to removal. If the Sikh patient was wearing any of the 5 K's articles of faith, leave them with the body.



CONCERNS FOR SURGEONS/ANESTHESIA

PREPPING FOR THE OPERATING ROOM

Turban/Headdress



- Sikh patients will want to keep their religiously-mandated turban on while in the OR. Many will wear a smaller turban that easily fits under a surgical bouffant cap and this should be allowed. If circumstances change while in the OR and it becomes absolutely necessary to remove the turban, it should be respected and placed with the patient's personal belongings. Turbans are not to be placed on the floor or with shoes.

IV's & Arterial Lines



- Refrain from shaving areas on an arm to place an arterial or intravenous line. Find areas with the least amount of hair to avoid pulling it out when it comes time to remove the line. While it is important to ensure the security of any IV or arterial lines, please be sensitive to this issue.

IN THE OPERATING ROOM

- Shaving/Hair Removal: To reiterate, if shaving the area of surgery is absolutely essential, consult the patient and fully inform them of the reason to do it. Avoid shaving any more than necessary. Understand that this may be a very difficult thing for the patient to go through so showing some compassion with regard to this issue can go a long way to comforting the patient.
- EKGs and Grounding Pads: Avoid shaving areas of the body to place these devices. Try to find locations with minimal hair to place these pads.
- Mask Ventilation: While it may be difficult to mask ventilate a patient with a beard, it is not permitted to shave the patient's beard without explicit consent. If you anticipate this to be a problem, consent should be obtained prior to the patient receiving any anxiolytics that could cloud the patient's judgment. It would be unethical to ask a patient to make a decision of this magnitude without a clear mind.
- Intubation: Some Sikh men use a string or netted band to tie up their beard which could limit the extent with which you could open the patient's mouth/jaw. If there appears to be resistance when opening the mouth, look for a string/netted band embedded in the patient's beard before proceeding.
- ET tube: When securing an ET tube, be mindful of a Sikh's facial hair and try to avoid taping directly to a patient's moustache or beard. When preparing the patient's skin, it may be wise to take extra time to carefully remove the tape from a patient's facial hair before the patient is awake to minimize hair loss.





CONCERNS FOR OTHER SPECIALISTS

- Psychiatry: Because many Sikhs in the USA are immigrants, the culture they bring with them places a very strong stigma on mental illness. As a result, older Sikhs will be less likely to seek care and accept treatment from a psychiatrist.
- ER Physicians and EMS: See Surgery/Anesthesia section for information on Intubation.

CONTACT US

Founded in 1996, SALDEF is a national impact organization focused on building leadership and capacity in the Sikh American community. For more information on the religion and history of the Sikhs and to obtain copies of this or other publications please contact SALDEF.



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