

Hinduism

Spiritual Well-Being: Hinduism is a vast and profound religion. Hindus worship One Supreme Reality, and believe that all souls ultimately realize that Truth, which may be approached through various names and forms. Spiritual well-being comes from leading a dedicated life based on non-violence, love, good conduct, and selfless service, and ultimately from experiencing the Truth within. The approach to spiritual well-being varies according to individual temperament. The Truth may be realized through devotion to a particular aspect of God, self-analysis, austerities, selfless service, or meditation.

Illness, Accident, Injury: Hinduism ascribes to the theory of Karma (the law of cause and effect). Each individual creates his or her own destiny by thoughts, words, and deeds. Illness, accident, and injury result from the karma one creates and are seen as a means of purification. Karma is believed to accrue over many lifetimes. Hence, an illness may be seen as a result of actions in this life or a past life.

Birth: For Hindus, noting the exact time of a baby's birth is important for the child's horoscope. Traditionally, in the East, a baby is born in the home of the wife's parents with a midwife present, but not the husband. In an American hospital, the Hindu husband may be present at the birth. A Hindu baby is breast fed. Males are not circumcised. Traditionally, the child is named in a celebration on the 10th day after birth. In an American hospital, however, the child is sometimes named at birth.

Abortion and Birth Control: Supported by their belief in Karma, most Hindus do not approve of abortion, with no exceptions for rape, deformities, or the like. However, birth control, natural or artificial, is approved of and practiced.

Special Care of Women: In an American hospital, a Hindu woman would most likely not request special care. She would want her husband's advice on any medical decisions.

Dietary Regulations: Vegetarianism is recommended in Hindu scriptures, but Hindus are free to choose their own diet. In India, vegetarian diet is widespread. Of those who eat meat, most abstain from beef and pork. In America, many Hindus, particularly second-generation, eat meat. Hot, spicy food is common, particularly with those from South India. Yogurt and sweets are taken along with meals. Indian food is fairly salty. Ghee (clarified butter) is often used for oil. Coffee and tea are both used. In the East, eating with the right hand, without utensils, is the traditional method. In America, eating with utensils is considered acceptable.

Bioethical Decision-Making (Living Will, Advance Directives, etc.): Hindu tradition does not approve of mercy killing, assisted suicide, or suicide. Prolonging life artificially is up to the individual. However, letting nature take its course is common in Hindu tradition. The making of a living will and/or advance directive (such as for the donation of organs) is likewise up to the individual.

Privacy/Space: Privacy and the use of space in an American hospital is up to the individual Hindu, in conjunction with the hospital authorities. Religious practices that would be done in a hospital do not necessarily require privacy.

Connecting with Community/Visitors: Hindu families are traditionally close-knit, in the West as well as in the East. A Hindu hospital patient would want his or her relatives to visit and close family members to help in the making of any medical decisions, such as whether or not to operate. If the Hindu patient is connected with a Hindu Temple or Ashram in the U.S., the patient may request the Hindu priest or Guru to visit.

Religious Beliefs and Practices Affecting Health Care

Ethnic (Language) and Cultural Sensitivity: Most Hindus in America speak English, but use their native language with others who speak the same language or dialect.

In Hindu culture, it is common to remove one's shoes before entering a home, a place of worship, and certain other places. In an American hospital setting, Hindu visitors may choose to remove their shoes before entering a patient's room.

If the patient is older than the visiting relative, the visitor would be expected to stand unless invited to sit by the patient. Respect for one's elders is engraved in Hindu culture, along with warm, affectionate family ties.

Personal Devotions and Religious Objects: In a hospital setting, personal devotions may consist of prayer, meditation, and the reading of scripture. A small picture or statue of a Deity may be used in prayer. A *mantram* (a sound vibration representing an aspect of the Divine) may be recited on a *mala* (prayer beads strung together, similar to a rosary). Facing North or East would be preferred, but not required.

Holiday Observances: Most religious holidays are observed according to the particular aspect of the Divine which the Hindu individual or family worships. For instance, a devotee of Lord Siva would celebrate Sivaratri on the New Moon, usually in February. A devotee of Lord Krishna would celebrate Krishna Jayanthi, known as Janmashthami, usually in August. A devotee of God as Divine Mother would celebrate Navaratri for nine nights in September or October. These are but a few of the many religious observances on the Hindu calendar.

Death, After Death, Bereavement: As in most cultures, a Hindu in America would prefer to die at home. However, if unavoidable, dying in a hospital would be acceptable. The dying patient may wish to be alone, with relatives, or with his or her priest or Guru (if possible). In the chapel of the funeral home, a Hindu priest, if available, would do the last rites. Both cremation and burial are common depending on local custom. It is believed that the soul will reincarnate again and again until its karma is exhausted. Giving in to remorse for the dead is said to make it more difficult for the soul of the deceased to leave the earthly plane. The ideal is to remember the deceased with happy thoughts, because wherever the soul is, it will receive those thoughts. Of course, given human nature, mourning for the dead is natural, but excessive mourning is not recommended.