

# Tips for health professionals working with south Asian communities

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There is enormous diversity in culture, traditions and food habits both between and within different ethnic groups, and even within a single family. It is vital that health professionals are familiar with these factors and should not make any assumptions.

## **FOOD RESTRICTIONS**

### **Muslims**

Will only eat 'Halal' (lawful) food where meat has been ritually slaughtered.

#### **Unlawful food 'Haram' foods include:**

- Food and food products from pig
- Foods containing ingredients or additives derived from pig, or from any animal, which has not been ritually slaughtered. This includes a wide range of manufactured foods such as gelatine, animal fats or emulsifiers derived from animal sources
- Shellfish or seafood without fins and scales
- Alcohol, including that used in cooking and for medicinal purposes.

### **Hindus**

Orthodox Hindus are strict lacto-vegetarians, not eating any type of meat, fish or eggs. The cow is regarded as a sacred animal and so even non-vegetarian Hindus will not eat any beef or any food containing beef extract. Alcohol is not forbidden but may not be consumed, especially by women.

### **Sikhs**

As a group they are less strict than Muslims and Hindus. Some Sikhs (especially women) are lacto-vegetarian, but many eat chicken, lamb and fish.

## **CUSTOMS**

- It is important a person is asked their ethnic origin/religion, as a person can be offended if mistaken to be of a different origin. Advice/treatment given should be culturally appropriate to that person
- Hands are always washed before and after meals
- Many people like to rinse their mouth after a meal
- Food is generally consumed with the right hand
- Strict vegetarians will not use china or utensils, which may have been in contact with fish or meat
- A Muslim person may refuse to consume food if concerned the dishes used for cooking have been in contact with 'unlawful food'
- Food may be refused if unsure what the food contains

- It is important to be aware of cultural/religious fasts and festivals so that these can be respected
- Elders within the South Asian community and generally the Muslim population prefer any group sessions to not be mixed sexes and male and female groups are separate.

### **References**

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