



PRIDE IN OUR DIVERSITY

The following information is provided to help you become more aware of your patients' and co-workers' views, traditions and actions. While you can use this information as a guide, keep in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your patients and their families about specific beliefs, practices and customs that may be relevant and important during medical treatment and hospitalization.

When describing the Chinese culture, the following information may apply to Chinese visiting from China, Taiwan or Hong Kong, first generation Chinese Americans or ensuing generations Chinese Americans. Each piece of information does not necessarily apply to all Chinese people.



general information

- ✓ You should formally address patients and family members, especially adults, as Mr., Ms., or Mrs. to show respect. Children can be called by their first names. Ask your patient how he/she wishes to be addressed.
- ✓ A response to a yes/no question is likely to be a nod, "Yes," or "I know." These responses may not indicate understanding; they may simply mean that the patient or family has heard you. Ask the patient or family member to repeat the information to ensure understanding.
- ✓ Family is an important part of the Chinese culture. Financial support within the family, especially for parents and the elderly, is common and part of the tradition. If Chinese Americans have family in their homeland, they generally visit as often as possible.
- ✓ There are many different dialects in the Chinese language. Cantonese-speaking patients may not understand a Mandarin-speaking interpreter; however, all Chinese writing is the same, so written communication may be an alternative if verbal communication is not effective.
- ✓ The more common religions among the Chinese are Buddhism, Christianity, Ancestral Worship, Taoism, and Confucianism.

inter-personal relationships

relationship roles

- ✓ In the Chinese culture, males are dominant, particularly among elderly members of the population. The wife most likely will wish to be at the bedside of her husband 24 hours a day.
- ✓ Elderly patients may be hesitant to ask for help if they think they can manage alone or with their spouses.
- ✓ Older male patients may be uncomfortable around female doctors and nurses -they tend to prefer male doctors.

personal space

- ✓ The Chinese generally are not a touching society, especially with strangers.
- ✓ The Chinese tend to stand very close to others, especially in conversation. Don't be surprised if stepping backward prompts the Chinese person you are conversing with to follow you by stepping forward.

gestures

- ✓ The Western custom of shaking a person's hand upon an introduction is becoming widespread with the Chinese. Bowing or a slight nod of the head is also an acceptable introduction gesture.
- ✓ The Chinese love to applaud - if you are applauded, be respectful and return the applause.

- ✓ Bowing is a way to show respect to the other party and is a way to say "goodbye" and "thank you."
- ✓ Patients and family members usually will stand to greet and/or to yield a seat to a doctor and nurse to be respectful. Sometimes family members will stand throughout the visit.

decision-making

- ✓ Ask the patient how he/she wants to make decisions concerning his/her treatment. Treatment decisions are often made by the family, rather than by the patient alone. The patient may want conversations about treatment to take place when the family is present.
- ✓ Elderly patients may not want to know all the details regarding their condition and treatment. Instead, they may prefer their family members know the details about the condition and handle scheduling for them. Elderly patients tend to do what the doctor and their family members desire or direct them to do. If a patient wants family members to make treatment decisions, call an ethics consultant.
- ✓ It is not uncommon for the patient and family to take a great deal of time when making a decision.
- ✓ Age plays an important role within the family structure. Children, regardless of their age, commonly defer to their parents, grandparents, and elders.

t r e a t m e n t i s s u e s

medical treatment

- ✓ Be sure the patient is aware that an interpreter can be provided, even if the only resource available is the AT&T Language Hotline. Patients and family members may feel closer to someone who speaks the same language.
- ✓ Because older patients are more likely to be afraid of doctors and hospitals, they may deny being ill.
- ✓ Chinese patients may be superstitious about why they are ill. Illness, especially cancer, may be viewed as a punishment. Patients or their families may believe an elder or grandparent has done something wrong or bad if a young person becomes ill or dies.
- ✓ Since patients may see both an American physician and a Chinese practitioner, it is important to ask what other medicines or herbs (including teas) the patient is taking. Some can cause an overdose or adverse reaction when combined with medicines prescribed by the physicians in the hospital.
- ✓ Chinese patients may not want to have blood tests because they believe blood tests allow the "chi" (the essence of one's body energy) to leak out of the body. Older patients may not understand that blood cells will regenerate.
- ✓ Sexuality issues are a very private matter, regardless of gender and age. If a discussion must take place, it is best to discuss with the wife first.
- ✓ Chinese patients believe that when they are sick, they need to rest. It may be difficult to get patients to perform even the simplest of activities - Chinese patients tend not to understand the importance of moving around and walking following an operation.
- ✓ Female patients, especially those from China, believe that during the first month after giving birth, they should remain in bed. They may believe that moving around will interfere with their healing. In some cases, too, they may not want to bathe or wash their hair, as these activities expose their bodies to cold air.



- ? There are approximately 30,000 to 35,000 Chinese Americans in the city of Chicago and 50,000 to 75,000 in the metropolitan area, according to a 1996 community estimate.
- ? Approximately 70% to 80% are first generation Americans, according to the 1990 Census.
- ? The 50,000 to 75,000 Chinese Americans in Illinois make it the U.S. state with the fifth largest Chinese community.
- ? Nearly 10,000 new Chinese Americans came to Chicago from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong between 1990 to 1994.
- ? In July, Chicago's Chinese community holds a Summer Fair in Chinatown.

t r e a t m e n t i s s u e s

emotions

- ✓ Feelings may be divided into two categories, public and private. Public feelings may not reflect the emotions the patient or family member truly feels, and personal or private feelings are generally not openly expressed.
- ✓ Some Chinese believe that "excessive" expression of emotion may upset the harmonious functions of the body (yin and yang) and actually cause disease.
- ✓ Harmonious relationships are very important. Any feeling or emotion the patient experiences that might upset these relationships may not openly be expressed, especially if it would upset the family.
- ✓ Silence is respected among the Chinese and should be interpreted as time for contemplation.

responses to pain

- ✓ The Chinese vocabulary has specific words that define ranges of emotion.
- ✓ Instead of asking a patient if he/she has pain, ask how much pain he/she is having.
- ✓ Because some patients may view discussion of pain as a sign of weakness (and endurance of it as a sign of character), it is critical to emphasize the importance of pain relief. Make a point to ask repeatedly about the level of pain, explaining you want to relieve the pain. Emphasize that enduring pain does not contribute to recovery. It is important to stress that relieving pain is not a "bother" for the nurse.

- ✓ Chinese patients, especially the elderly, may be afraid to take medicine - they believe medicine can weaken the body. Ask them if they prefer to take a lower dosage than the actual prescribed dose.
- ✓ Patients may believe symptom relief should happen quickly. Pointing out progress or improvement may make results more obvious and act as an incentive for the patient to continue treatment. However, many Chinese patients may think the illness is cured when the symptoms are gone.

food

- ✓ To be polite, a patient may decline an offer, such as "Would you like something to drink?" unless asked twice or more. Do not be afraid to keep asking.
- ✓ Devout Buddhists are vegetarians.
- ✓ Chinese patients believe food, when metabolized, is turned into chi (energy) and becomes either "yin," a cold force, or "yang," a hot force. Often hot or cold foods (cold and hot do not refer to temperature) will be used to bring yin and yang into balance. Illnesses caused by yin are treated with hot foods; those caused by yang are treated with cold foods. When a patient has been diagnosed with an illness, if the patient wishes, you may indicate in the patient's chart that his/her diet may be changed accordingly.

t r e a t m e n t i s s u e s

food (continued)

- ✓ The family may wish to bring hot and cold foods to the patient depending on the illness. For example, cancer is a cold disease and is treated with hot foods. Cold and hot foods may differ from family to family. As long as they do not contradict the patient's medical diet, this should be allowed and encouraged.
- ✓ Chinese women may want to eat "hot foods" to restore the chi (energy) to their bodies because blood lost during child birth altered their chi balance.
- ✓ Ice water is considered harmful - most Chinese patients boil water before they drink it. They generally prefer drinking hot water or lukewarm water to cold. If it is not possible to give them hot water, boiled cool water is acceptable. Be sure to tell the patient the water has been boiled.
- ✓ Patients may not like Western food and may ask family members to bring food from home.
- ✓ Elderly patients believe that when they are sick, their weakened digestive systems can't tolerate a normal diet - they may prefer soft foods like congee, noodles, or soup.

death

- ✓ In the Chinese culture, patients are typically told little of the life-threatening aspects of illness. Explanations are made only to the family who cares for the patient.
- ✓ The family usually will want to stay at the bedside when the patient dies.
- ✓ Age at death may be important to a Chinese family. Dying old may be seen as a blessing, while dying young may be seen as a punishment from a higher force.
- ✓ If the patient dies, clothing may be left in the hospital for a period of time to allow "evil spirits" to leave. Help the family to make arrangements to pick it up at a later date.
- ✓ Families from the Chinese culture may frown on autopsies.
- ✓ Patients are often unwilling to permit the donation of body parts.
- ✓ Hospice and home care services are new concepts to most Chinese patients.
- ✓ Having strangers come to a patient's house can be very uncomfortable for both the patient and his/her family.

important holidays & dates

Event	Date	Description
Lunar New Year (Chinese New Year)	Date varies, usually end of January or beginning of February	Marks the beginning of the New Year.
Nirvana Day	February 15	Observed by Buddhists, this day commemorates the death of the Buddha.
Lent	40 days before Easter	Marks a period of preparation and penitence before Easter. Generally, there are food restrictions during this period.
Easter	Date varies, usually an April Sunday	Commemorates the resurrection of Christ.
Hanamatsuri Day (Buddha Day)	April 8	Observed by Buddhists, this day celebrates the birth of Buddha.
Chingming/Ghost Festival	April, date varies	Marks the coming of spring, honors those who have passed away.
August Moon Festival	August, date varies	Celebrates the harvest and full moon of the eighth lunar month.
Special birthdays	When relatives turn age 70 and 80	Children honor their parents by hosting banquets to acknowledge their family lineage.
Christmas	December 25	Celebrates the birth of Christ.

Sources

Linton, Cynthia. "Chinese Americans." *The Ethnic Handbook. A Guide to Cultures and Traditions of Chicago's Diverse Communities*. Chicago, Illinois: The Business Press, 1996. p. 31-36.

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. "Getting Acquainted With..." *Diversity Cards*. New York, NY

Conversations with Livi Szeto, University of Chicago Hospitals.