

I. Description of Culture

A. History

- The Cambodian culture is at least 2000 years old
- Cambodia was a French colony from 1862 until 1953 when it became an independent kingdom
- In 1975 the Khmer Rouge (“The Killing Fields”) movement, under the leadership of Pol Pot, overthrew the Cambodian government and carried out a radical program of evacuating cities, closing factories and schools, and herding people into collective farms. Intellectuals and skilled workers were assassinated. Approximately 1.7 million people lost their lives (21% of the country’s population) as a result of starvation and brutality.
- The biggest wave of Cambodian refugees entered the United States in 1981 from Thailand. Large numbers continued to flood in until 1985. After 1985, only small numbers immigrated each year in conjunction with family reunification programs.

B. Demographics

- The number of Cambodian refugees and immigrants admitted in the United States is slightly over 176,000
- The greatest numbers of Cambodians live in California and Massachusetts.
- Around 760 currently live in Maine (mostly in Portland)

C. Religion

- Theravada Buddhism is the official religion in Cambodia; Buddhism teaches that most of the suffering experienced in life can be traced to desire or passion. The way to escape suffering is by diminishing one’s desires, lust, aggression, avariciousness and deceit. Buddhists believe in reincarnation.
- Approximately 90% of Cambodians are Buddhist
- 10% are either Muslim or Christian

D. Food

- Traditionally Cambodians eat together as a family usually three times a day
- Rice and fish are the most common foods eaten, but their diet also includes chicken, eggs, pork (non-Muslim), and occasionally beef, as well as lots of fruits and vegetables.
- Rice is expected at every meal
- Dairy products are much disliked and avoided. Cambodians may be lactose intolerant.
- Spoons and forks are most commonly used, rarely chopsticks.

E. Holidays/Celebrations/Rituals

- Cambodian New Year is celebrated around April 14 – 16. People clean and decorate their houses, and prepare beautiful offerings of fruits, drinks, and flowers for the inauguration of New Angels who come to take care of the world for a one-year term.
- “Vesaka Bochea” is a religious celebration of the birth of Buddha, his enlightenment, and the day Buddha entered Nirvana. It is observed on May 15.
- The “Water Festival” is one of the biggest and most exuberant festivals in Cambodia. It takes place in November (August in the U.S.) This festival celebrates the rainy season and the abundance of fish. It is famous for its traditional boat races, which take place on a large scale.
- Birthdays are not celebrated

F. Clothing

- Traditional public dress for women consists of a skirt (“sampot”) and a blouse
- Men wear trousers, shirts and sweaters
- A traditional Cambodian multi-purpose garment is the checkered scarf called “krama”, which may be used as a shawl, turban, sarong, a towel or even a carrying bag.

- In the U.S. both men and women wear Western clothing to the workplace and traditional dress at home and in their communities

II. Family/Relationships/Roles

- The Cambodian refugee family may be a combination of related individuals and fictive (“adopted”) kin who now reside with the family. Family loyalty is highly valued
- Because wives do not take the names of their husbands, there may be several surnames in a single household. A man’s mother, wife and children will have different surnames with only the child’s surname being the same as the father’s.
- Children are highly valued by Cambodians. The ideal number of offspring is five. Children are expected to care for and respect their aging parents
- The husband is the authority figure in the household and makes decisions about important matters affecting the family as a whole or any of its members
- Elders are respected and valued
- Cambodians are accustomed to life in small communities with strong support from extended family and friends
- Men and women have distinct roles. Traditionally, men work outside of the home, while women take care of the children and are responsible for managing the household

III. Communication

A. Language

- Cambodians speak Khmer, which is the official language of Cambodia. It is not a tonal language (such as Vietnamese or Thai)
- The Khmer system of writing is based on the South Indian alphabet. The written language is syllabic (neither alphabet nor character based)
- There are differences between spoken “city” Khmer and “rural” Khmer. These are immediately apparent to Cambodians, who assess education level and social status accordingly.

B. Greetings/Gestures

- Cambodians greet each other with a gesture called “sampeah”. They place their palms together near their faces (as if praying) bow their head and say “chum reap sur”.
- Cambodians are not known to use gestures a lot. Beckoning a person with a crooked index finger is considered insulting. Pointing with a finger or a foot at someone is also offensive
- Cambodians may not maintain eye contact with someone who is older or considered a superior because it is not considered polite.

C. Personal space/Touch

- Shaking hands is despised especially with people of the opposite sex.
- The comfort zone between people engaged in a standing conversation is at least three feet; more if they are of the opposite sex.
- There is very little physical contact (except with small children)
- Boys and girls (beyond early childhood) and unmarried men and women should not touch

D. Conversation

- Cambodians are polite, attentive and respectful in conversation.
- The tone of voice and words are carefully chosen
- They are not emotional speakers
- Lavish praise is embarrassing to them and criticism is taken very seriously
- Saving face is *very* important

IV. **Work/Play & Leisure**

- Cambodians are mostly farmers (80% of population in Cambodia)
- Few Cambodians have overcome the obstacles in the United States for employment. Those who have generally own and/or work in restaurants, grocery stores, jewelry stores, factories, or hold janitorial positions
- Many Cambodians in the United States are unemployed and receive assistance from the government
- Cambodians enjoy soccer and water sports such as swimming and rowing

- Martial arts such as kickboxing are widely practiced
- Dance is a very popular form of leisure and play. There are two major types of Cambodian dance: Classical, which was used to laud the members of the royal class until 1970, and Folk, which depicts popular fables and tales and is used during cultural festivals and weddings.

V. Health/Wellness

- Many adults wish to bathe two or more times a day. Children are bathed even more frequently
- The concept of balance between life forces, energies, and hot/cold foods is important to Cambodians
- The head is a sacred place on the body for Cambodians. It is where the spirit resides.
- Popular forms of folk medicine practiced by Cambodians are coin rubbing, cupping and massage, as well as the use of herbal remedies
- Cambodians also consult with traditional healers such as “Kru Khmer”, bonesetters, and Chinese herbalists to obtain medical advice or cure
- Cambodians wish for the whole family to be present during an individual’s struggle with a serious illness and/or death

VI. Challenges to healthcare

- Language is a major barrier for most Cambodians. Many adults are illiterate in English and spoken English is very difficult for them to learn
- Cambodians do not value preventive medicine and expect a quick cure from Western physicians. They value potent medications and injections, which doctors are expected to prescribe
- They tend to be “passively obedient”, agreeing with clinicians but failing to follow through with long-term treatment regimens
- Cambodians are extremely modest and will rarely fully undress even in intimate situations
- In Cambodian culture it is not proper to show any signs of pain, either physical and/or psychological

- Cambodians do not believe that it is proper to discuss harmful personal situations with others; it is seen as a weakness

VII. Suggestions for healthcare providers

- The use of same sex and same age interpreters is most beneficial for any spoken language barriers. Avoid using children as interpreters
- Khmer language video tapes are available at no charge at some ethnic grocery stores for education on medical needs and directions
- Ensure utmost privacy when working with a Cambodian client
- When possible, female clinicians should be assigned to Cambodian female clients
- Begin medical and social history interview with conversations of family and other casual topics; it is considered rude to begin probing on such discreet subjects right away
- If a Cambodian client wears an amulet on his/her body, leave it on
- Ask for permission to touch or examine the head of a Cambodian (and explain why it is necessary)
- Use multiple teaching aids such as models, pictures, posters and interactive devices while explaining health related information to a Cambodian client.
- Be aware that Cambodians rely on electronic equipment, such as a television set, VCR, cassette player, and video camera to communicate with relatives (most Cambodians are illiterate in the Khmer language). Using or making training tapes for the home may be an excellent vehicle of communication.

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