

The Somali Culture



Researched by

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I. Description of Culture

A. Demographics

- From 1980-1993, greater than 4,589 Somalis were granted refugee admission to the United States
- At least 200 refugees/immigrants from Somalia have arrived in Portland and 750 in Lewiston (April 2002)

B. Brief History

- Clashes over land boundaries were common for many years, which caused clan rivalries and eventually led to the civil war of 1988-1992
- As a result of the civil war approximately 400,000 people have died and over 1 million people have fled to refugee camps around the world

C. Foods

- Somalis only eat Halal or Kosher meats
- Somalis eat/drink milk products, fruits, vegetables, and pasta
- Do not consume pork or alcohol due to religious beliefs

D. Dress

- Men are expected to cover their body from knees to waist, and often wear “Western” pants or a kilt, western shirt, and a shawl
- Most women wear shawls and head scarves, but generally do not veil faces

E. Language/Communication

- Universal language is Somali and Arabic is their second language
- Many Somalis also know some English, French, and/or Italian
- A uniform writing system was not adopted in Somalia until 1973
- Percentage of people literate in Somalia was less than 10% in 1970s and 24% today
- Often greet someone with, “*salam aleikum*” (“Peace be upon you”) and then shake hands - but it is wise to shake hands slowly
- Men and women only shake hands with members of the same sex
- Respect is paid to the elders of the community by addressing them as “aunt” or “uncle,” even if they are strangers
- “Saving face” is important, so indirectness and humor are often used in conversation

F. Holidays

- Ramadan is the 9th month of the lunar calendar, which consists of 30 days of fasting from sunrise to sunset
 - Pregnant women, people who are very ill, and children (under 14 years old) are exempted from the Ramadan fast
- ‘Eid al Fitr is a three day festival held at the end of Ramadan – Somalis may take time off from work or school for this holiday

G. Religion

- Most Somalis are Sunni Muslims
- They believe in a single God (Allah) and that Muhammad was the last and greatest prophet (not Jesus)
- Islamic scripture, the Qur'an, is believed to be the word of Allah as revealed to Muhammad
- Somalis are expected to pray 5 times a day - usually in the morning, at 12pm, 4pm, sunset, and before bed
- Ablution is a requirement of prayer – which is to wash the face, arms, legs, and private parts in the bathroom before praying
- Women aren't required to pray during their menstrual period

I. Family, Relationships, and Roles

- Somali society is organized into large extended clan families – determined by paternal lineage
- Their definition of family includes both their immediate and extended family members
- Somalis deeply value family and loyalty to others
- Women are not considered to be equal with men
- Men and women are to be separated in schools and in daily interactions
- Women friends entertain each other in various rooms in the house or on the veranda while men often meet friends outside of the home
- Women are free to earn money and have full authority over that money, but are not required to finance their households
- Men are seen as “in charge” and are responsible for maintaining and providing for the family unit
- A woman's status is enhanced by the number of children she has - it is common for a Somali family to have between 7 and 8 children
- Men who can afford it, may have up to 4 wives

III. Concept of Work/Play/Time

- Work and leisure are considered valuable if they don't interfere with religious duties
- Somalis often choose work that will benefit/serve others
- Enjoy poetry, music, dance, woodcarving, and painting
- Hand and foot painting is popular (weddings or births)
- Importance of being on time differs from “Western” culture –but they will try not to be late since the Quran says that someone who does not honor time commitments is a hypocrite.

IV. Health and Wellness

- Traditional healing techniques include herbs, prayer, and fire burning, which is done by heating a stick from a special tree until it glows and then applying it to the skin in order to cure illness
- Some Somalis believe that spirits reside within each individual and if spirits become angry illnesses such as fever, headache, dizziness, and weakness may occur. This belief is diminishing among Somalis.
 - Cure of spirit possession involves a healing ceremony, including reading from the Qur'an, eating special foods, and burning incense
- Somalis believe that a person can give someone the “evil eye” on purpose or inadvertently by verbally praising that person, which brings harm or illness to the person praised
- A woman and her baby stay indoors at home for the 40 days following birth – this time is known as “Afartanbah”
- Newborn care consists of warm water baths, sesame oil massages, and passive stretching of the baby’s limbs
 - The herb *malmal* is applied to the umbilicus for the first 7 days of life
- Female circumcision was brought to Somalia from ancient Egypt. Although it is still practiced, it is not necessarily desirable, and the practice is diminishing.
 - Seen as a right of passage and necessary for marriage
- Somalis value cleanliness, bathe, and wash often
- Common medical conditions in Somalia are: Cholera, Dysentery, Polio, Tetanus, RVF Virus, Asthma, Hepatitis B, Tuberculosis, and Aids

V. Barriers to Health Care

- Somali women have a strong preference to work with female interpreters and health care providers
- It is considered uncaring to tell a terminally ill person or the family that the person is dying
 - It is acceptable to describe the extreme seriousness of an illness
 - When death is impending, a special portion of the Qur'an is read at the patient’s bed
- Rigid hours of most offices and clinics may not be appreciated at first
- Many Somali women practice infibulation (female circumcision)
- Somalis expect to receive medication from any type of medical visit and may become unhappy if they travel for a long distance and don’t receive medications
- During Ramadan, patients will take medications only at night
- Due to religion and traditional practices, Somalis are prohibited to touch the saliva of a dog, drink alcohol, or to consume pork

VI. Suggestions for Health Care Providers

1. If no medications are given, providers should explain why
2. Health care facilities should assign providers and interpreters who are appropriate in gender (when possible)
3. Providers should ask patients about dietary restrictions and take these into account
4. Health care providers need to recognize that circumcision is an important issue for Somali woman and strive to keep the lines of communication with patients open
2. Health care staff need to be aware and considerate of social and religious customs
3. Providers need to keep in mind that during the month of Ramadan, patients will take medications only at nighttime
6. Health care staff should recognize and be sensitive to the fact that Somalis consider it uncaring to tell someone or their family that a person is dying
7. Providers should keep in mind that Somalis may be uncomfortable around dogs

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