



# Communicating with Your Korean Patient

*Perception of Illness • Patterns of Kinship and Decision Making • Comfort with Touch*

Culture Clues™ is designed to increase awareness about concepts and preferences of patients from diverse cultures. **Every person is unique; always consider the individual's beliefs, needs, and concerns.** Use Culture Clues™ and information from the patient and family to guide your communication and your patient care.

## How does the Korean culture deal with illness?

### *Explaining the Cause of Illness and Disease*

- Your patient may follow Buddhist or Confucian doctrine, viewing illness and death as a natural part of life.
- Symptoms may be seen as bad luck, misfortune or the result of “karma”—payback for something they did wrong in the past.
- Your patient’s illness may be a response to stress in the family and other interpersonal relationships.
- Health may be viewed as finding harmony between complementary energies such as cold and hot, female and male and dark and light. These forces are called “yin and yang.”
  - **Ask your patient, “What do you call your problem? When did it start? What do you think caused the problem? Have you taken any medicines or folk medicines (herbs)? What results have you had from the medicines or herbs? Do you believe the illness is serious? How is your life going lately? Are you experiencing more stress, disagreements, and misunderstandings?”**
- Many patients seek medical care from *hanui*, a traditional herbal doctor. *Hanyak* or herbal medicines are widely used. Ginseng is a popular herb.
  - **Build bridges between folk medicine and western care: when considering folk practices, determine when the remedies are beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Incorporate beneficial and neutral remedies into the plan of care. Consider potential drug interactions.**

### *Understanding the Relationship between Physical and Mental Illness*

- Physical complaints are readily accepted. Mental illness is viewed as stigmatizing and threatening. As a result, psychological and social stress may be experienced bodily.
- *Hwabyung* is an example of a Korean culture-bound illness, common in women. The cause of this illness is suppressed anger or intolerable tragic situations. Symptoms of *hwabyung* include a perceived stomach mass, palpitations, heat sensation, flushing, anxiety and irritability.
- Your patient may believe that talking about the situation can relieve symptoms.

### *Helping Your Patient Understand Medications*

- Your patient may believe that western medicine is too strong and may not take the full dose or complete the course of treatment. Your patient may cut the dose in half or stop taking the medicine whether or not they feel better.
  - **Explain that the dose is customized for your patient’s height, weight and metabolic needs. Describe the need to take the full dose whether your patient feels better right away or not. Ask open-ended questions to ensure understanding.**
  - **Alert:** Be aware that your patient may have some enzyme deficiencies that require a reduction in medication dose. Contact pharmacy for a consult on medications.

## How are medical decisions made in the Korean culture?

### *Making Decisions about Health Care*

- Consult with the family in cases of serious or terminal illness. While the decision making is family focused, the husband, father, eldest son, or daughter may have the final say. The eldest male is often the spokesperson.
  - **Ask your patient whom they want included in medical decisions. If the patient does not want to make medical decisions for themselves, let them know they need to prepare a Durable Power of Attorney for health care.**
  - **When possible, engage the whole family in discussions that involve decisions about care.**

### *Managing Medical News*

- Bad medical news is often shielded from the patient. The family may believe that the patient is in no condition to make a decision and that bad news dissolves hope.
  - **Ask your patient whom he/she wants included in medical decisions.**
- Because of traditional Korean values of loyalty, the patient may trust that the parents and family will make the best decision for them. Therefore, advance directives may seem unnecessary to the patient and family.
- The informed consent process may be a new experience for your patient.
  - **If it is your patient's first experience with informed consent, explain its purpose.**

## What are the Korean culture's norms about touch?

### *Understanding Norms about Eye Contact and Body Language*

- Do not expect sustained direct eye contact. When you first meet your patient he or she may frequently look at you when you are not looking to become more comfortable.
- Handshakes are appropriate between men; women do not shake hands. Respect is shown to authority figures by giving a gentle bow.

### *Understanding Personal Space*

- Your patient may highly value emotional self-control, appearing stoic. Be aware that your patient may not show pain or ask for pain medications. Instead of asking your patient about pain, ask, "May I get you something for pain?"
- Respect of your patient's desire to keep emotions in control when asked about upsetting matters.

### *Understanding Norms about Modesty*

- Consider the modesty of women and girls when giving a pelvic exam. Many young women are modest about having an exam and may prefer a female doctor to do it. In some cases, your patient may refuse a gynecologic exam from a provider of either gender.
- Before you begin a gynecological exam, it is important to ask your patient, "May I examine you?"
- Ask your patient if she prefers a female or interpreter to remain in the room during the exam.

## What is unique about this patient and family that you will not learn from culture tips or information?

There are cultural differences based on age, ethnic group, generation, migration wave, and length of time away from Korea.

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*Culture Clues*<sup>™</sup> is a project of the Staff Development Workgroup, Patient and Family Education Committee

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