



# A HANDBOOK FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS

## Understanding Sikh Faith





**This handbook offers understanding the basic principles of Sikh faith and how medical care needs to be in line with Sikh faith and practice when treating Sikh Patients.**



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# TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction	4
Sikh Faith & Place of Worship	5-7
Basic Principles	8
Sikh Values	9
Sikh Appearance	10
Articles of Faith	11-12
Treating Sikh Patients	13-15
Sikh Beliefs	16-17
Preferences and Cultural Sensitivities	18-20
Pregnancy & Childbirth	21
Pediatric Considerations	22
References	23
Correspondence	24

# INTRODUCTION



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The Sikh faith is a practical way of life. The word Sikh means a disciple, a disciple of one Creator, God (Waheguru). Sikhs have a disciplined life following a code of conduct. The interpretation of Sikh principles and the way they practice it may slightly differ from person to person. It is important to ask each individual, and their family what is important to them, and what is needed to respect their individual values and beliefs during the caregiving process.

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Healthcare providers must understand that due to immigration and migration, there are large Sikh populations in various areas around the world, including other parts of India (outside of the province of Punjab), parts of Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania), Britain, and the United States. Migration, immigration and settlement patterns have had a large effect on the cultures – values, beliefs, and lifestyles – of these different populations.

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Sikhs greet each other by folding their hands as a sign of respect and saying 'Sat Shri Akaal,' a common salutation meaning 'God is the eternal truth'. This greeting holds deep spiritual and cultural significance. Using it can create a welcoming environment that fosters trust and open communication while demonstrating respect for the patient's faith.



# SIKH FAITH



The Sikh faith originated in  
**1469** in **Punjab**  
**(India)**



Sikhs believe in one God and  
follow the teachings of 10  
Gurus; Eternal Living Guru is

**Guru Granth**  
**Sahib ji** (Sikh holy  
scriptures)



Over **25**  
**million** Sikhs  
worldwide



# SIKH FAITH

**5<sup>th</sup>** largest  
religion

The U.S. is home to over

**500,000 Sikhs**

With **300+ worship  
places** (Gurudwara) in  
the US



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Sikh faith is an independent faith with its unique founder, sacred texts, spiritual leaders, ceremonies, theology, discipline, practices, history and places of worship.

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In Sikh faith, many individuals share common last names as a reflection of their belief in equality. Women typically adopt last name “Kaur,” meaning princess. Men use last name of “Singh,” meaning lion. This naming practice signifies a rejection of caste-based hierarchies. Both men and women are treated equally in Sikh faith.

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Some Sikhs may also use family names based on their ancestors or village as the last name, while retaining Singh or Kaur as a middle name.

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Sikhs believe in helping others, not following superstitions or caste systems, and focusing on a direct connection with God.





# GURUDWARA

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The Sikh worship place is called a Gurudwara. The true Guru continues teaching, touching and blessing every heart through His sweet words 'Gurbani' compiled as Sikhs' Holy Scriptures 'Guru Granth Sahib ji', the living Guru.

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The Guru Granth Sahib ji is at the heart of Sikh worship, and its presence lends sanctity to the Gurdwara, where it is installed on an altar and the devotees pay their obeisance to the Guru. The services at Gurudwara consist of singing of hymns from 'Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji' and sharing meal (langar).

# BASIC PRINCIPLES

Earn

Earn an honest living



Share

Share earnings  
with others



Meditate

Always remember and  
meditate on God





# SIKH VALUES



Devotion

Remembering God

Truthful living

Equality

Justice

Selfless service

Sharing

Humility

Denounce superstitions and blind rituals

Avoiding worldly temptations



## APPEARANCE

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Men may have long, uncut hair and wear a turban, while women may also choose to wear one. Although both men and women can wear turbans, they are more commonly seen on men.

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Hair is considered a gift from God, and so hair becomes a symbol of loving God and respecting everything God has given.

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A patient must be consulted and give explicit permission prior to trimming, cutting or shaving any hair from any part of the body (even for routine procedures such as taking blood).

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The turban, or dastaar, is a key symbol of Sikh identity, representing equality, dignity, and spiritual commitment. It serves as a religious article that covers uncut hair, reflecting the Sikh principle of living in harmony with nature. Personal preferences often dictate the styles, patterns, and colors of turbans. For younger children, a head covering called a Patka is typically worn.

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The turban is not like a hat, it is considered a crown – respect and privacy must be given for removing or tying it.

# 5 ARTICLES OF FAITH



**Kes**  
**(Uncut Hair)**



**Kara**  
**(Steel Bracelet)**



**Kangha**  
**(Wooden Comb)**



**Kashera**  
**(Cotton Shorts)**



**Kirpan**  
**(Sheathed Curved Dagger)**

# SIGNIFICANCE OF ARTICLES OF FAITH

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Uncut Hair (Kesh) are a symbol of holiness and strength as Sikh follows the appearance of their Guru. Not cutting hair is the symbol of preserving the gift of Creator and attain spiritual maturity.

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Steel Bracelet (Kara) as a reminder that Creator is beyond beginning or end, like a circle. It is also a reminder of the Sikh's bond with the Guru.

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Wooden Comb (Kangha) to keep hair clean and symbolizes hygiene and ridding oneself of impurities and what is morally undesirable. Sikhs may brush their hair with the kanga (comb) two times a day. Sikhs don't throw their hair in garbage, rather keep them to dispose off respectfully via periodic cremations.

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Cotton Shorts (Kashera), a symbol of chastity and sexual morality. The undershorts are worn at all times therefore, patients may request that the undershorts be tied to one of their legs during physical exam or any medical procedure.

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Sheathed Curved Dagger (Kirpan)- The word Kirpan is a portmanteau composed of Kirpa meaning mercy and aan means honor, carried to defend and protect the weak. Kirpan is also to symbolize fight against injustice.

# TREATING SIKH PATIENTS

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Baptized/Practicing Sikhs (Punjabi word is Amrit dhaari) wear five articles of faith at all times including a sheathed dagger, a wooden comb worn in the hair, uncut hair covered in turban, a cotton shorts, and a steel bracelet. Most Sikhs prefer not to remove any of the articles during medical treatment unless it is must for a medical procedure like a MRI or a scan etc. Either way, permission should be sought before removal of any of the articles. If any of the articles of Sikh faith are removed, they should be given to the family members or kept on a high place with respect.

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Sikhs may or may not have a distinctive appearance or wear all the articles of faith, yet this does not diminish their identity as Sikhs.

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It is also common for young children or even infants to wear one or more articles of faith. Additionally, many Sikhs who are not baptized still may maintain uncut hair (kes) and wear a kara (steel bracelet).

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Healthcare providers should recognize and respect these variations in how individuals express their faith.

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When a Sikh patient nears the end of life, it is common for many relatives and close friends to gather to offer support and prayers.

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When dealing with a death of a patient following the Sikh faith, articles should still stay with the body. The family and Sikh priest (Granthi) would prepare for funeral as per the Sikh tradition.



## TREATING SIKH PATIENTS

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Please note practicing Sikh patients value their hair and hold in high regard their unshorn hair and can become distressed with the news their hair may need to be cut/shaved.

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Whenever possible, alternatives should be explored to avoid cutting hair. For planned procedures, discuss with the patient in advance, ensuring sensitivity and respect for their religious beliefs.

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Families and elder people in the family are important and their involvement in the medical treatment for patient must be respected.

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The primary language of Sikhs is Punjabi, and many elderly individuals and new immigrants may not speak English. In such cases, an interpreter with a strong command of Punjabi should be made available. It is essential to provide interpreters or translated materials in Punjabi. Healthcare facilities should ensure that Punjabi is included in their list of translation services to effectively meet this need.

# TREATING SIKH PATIENTS

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Sikhs value medicine and sciences and are not prohibited to receive medical treatment however they do not cut their hair unless there is a medical emergency or life-threatening condition, that requires hair to be shorn to perform a medical procedure.

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In Sikh faith, there are typically no restrictions on the use of medications, provided they are intended for healing rather than intoxication. However, Baptized Sikhs may adhere to a strict vegetarian lifestyle and may hesitate to use medications containing animal byproducts or alcohol or narcotics. In such cases, it is important to consult the patient and permission must be sought from the patient for the medication use. Open communication and sensitivity to the patient's religious beliefs are essential in such situations.





## SIKH BELIEFS

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The gutka contains select Sikh scriptures from the Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji. It is usually wrapped in a cloth. You may find it by the bedside of patients. Extended hospital stays can be challenging for Sikh patients due to separation from their community. Access to the Gutka or opportunities to listen to hymns can help provide comfort.

Also patients may have kindles or e-books with the same respect shown.

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If you need to move the gutka, ask the patient or family member. Make sure your hands are clean. The gutka is treated with incredible respect, and should not be put on the floor, near the washroom, or underneath other books/magazines. Sikhs strongly believe in God and pray for themselves and for well-being of others, so they may read the hymns aloud from the gutka.



# SIKH BELIEFS- CONTINUED

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Sikhs strongly believe in One Creator ('Waheguru') and believe that the birth and death is in Creator's hands. Sikhs also believe in reincarnation. (Sikhs believe that all living beings have an eternal soul which passes through successive cycles of birth and rebirth until the soul once again merges with God, through meditation)

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Noble deeds, selfless giving and sacrifice are important teachings of Sikh faith.



# FOOD PREFERENCES

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Sikhs who are baptized and practicing the faith have strict dietary beliefs usually

- No egg, meat, fish, alcohol
- No cigarettes
- No illicit drugs
- Dairy products are ok

Ingredients and additives such as gelatin, enzymes (animal rennet), fish oil etc. that may be found in some foods, could make them unsuitable for Sikhs.

A family member or friend may bring “parshaad”, a sacramental food that is made in the Gurdwara or home (made of sugar, flour, and clarified butter), to the patient. If eating this food is medically contraindicated, please let the family or patient know, or suggest adjustments (e.g. eating only a small amount)

Please have a conversation with patient to determine their personal dietary needs and restrictions.



# TRADITIONAL MEDICINES AND REMEDIES

Sikhs recite and listen to Gurbani (sacred hymns- words uttered by Sikh Gurus and enshrined in the Holy Scriptures Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji) and pray for their physical and spiritual well-being as well as for the well-being of whole world (Sarbat da bhala). Devotional music, or Kirtan, is deeply meaningful to Sikh patients and can provide comfort during hospital stays. However, if in a shared room with other patients, offering Sikh patient to use headphones can allow the Sikh patient to continue their practice. Sikhs find comfort and strength through prayer, meditation, and connecting with the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib ji. Reciting prayers, such as Ardaas (a prayer for guidance and blessings), can bring peace and hope.

Sikhs may use a variety of traditional medicines and remedies, often in conjunction with herbs and plant products, in addition to traditional treatments such as Ayurveda, Homeopathy and Yoga. These treatments traditionally played an important role in treating illnesses in India and continue to be used today, including in communities in foreign countries.

# CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

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Sikh patients may prefer and request the treatment from the same gender healthcare provider, which should be respected whenever possible.

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Daily bathing, early morning prayer (Nitnem), evening prayer (Rehraas Sahib) and bedtime prayer (Kirtan Sohila) and meditation are part of the Sikh way of life and accommodations should be made during Sikh patients' prayer time whenever possible.

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Transplants, organ donation and blood transfusions are permitted. Abortion and Circumcision are not permitted. This medical decisions are always the patient's individual choice.

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Some are not comfortable with vaccines with egg-based technology or other technologies due to the cell lines.

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The decisions that a Sikh patient makes are their own decisions, but each person practices the Sikh faith to the extent they feel comfortable with, and you may encounter differences from patient to patient.

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# PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH

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Sikh teachings emphasize the sacredness of life and the importance of family.

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Contraception is generally considered a personal choice, with no specific prohibitions in Sikh faith. Open discussions with patients can help align care with their values.

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Pregnancy is often seen as a blessing, and many Sikh families may seek spiritual support during this time.

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Regular prenatal check-ups are accepted and encouraged, though traditional remedies or practices may also be integrated.

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Respect cultural and spiritual preferences around reproductive health and childbirth.

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Be sensitive to any reluctance regarding genetic testing or procedures involving embryos.

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During pregnancy, mothers are encouraged to focus on prayers, meditation, and reading from the Guru Granth Sahib ji to bring peace and positivity.

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After birth, some families may adorn the newborn with articles of faith.

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Ceremonial naming and blessings for the newborn may occur soon after birth, often at the Gurdwara, so they might not be able to give the child a name while in hospital.

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## PEDIATRIC CONSIDERATIONS

For children, a Patka is a simple and comfortable way to cover their hair as they grow older. As they mature, they may transition to wearing a full turban. It is important to treat the Patka or turban worn by children with the same respect as the turban worn by adults.

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Avoid cutting hair unless medically necessary and seek parental permission.

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Parental involvement is critical in decisions related to Sikh articles of faith when giving medical treatment to Sikh children. Use Punjabi interpreters if needed for non-English speaking families.

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Adhere to dietary restrictions common to Sikh adults. Consult with parents to tailor treatment plans appropriately.





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