Somali Refugees:

A Guide for Health-care Workers



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HOW TO USE THIS PRESENTATION

This presentation is designed to give a general overview of Somali culture for individuals working in the healthcare field. It is not intended to be a full account of the culture and beliefs of all Somali immigrants.

It is important to note that the information contained in this presentation will not be applicable to all Somalis. Changes in Somali culture will also occur as the acculturation process continues in the United States.

Providers are encouraged to assess the needs and behavior of all patients individually.

Somalia



Area: Slightly smaller than Texas

Population: 9.5 million

Capital: Mogadishu

Religions: Sunni Muslim

Life Expectancy: 49 years

Total Fertility Rate: 6.6 children

Literacy: 38%

A BRIEF HISTORY

- 1000 AD--Somalia was known as the Land of Punt (source of the myrrh and frankincense mentioned in the Bible).
- 19th Century—Somalia colonized by France, Italy, and Britain
- 1960—Britain and Italy cede possession
- 1969—Major General Siyad Barre takes power in a coup
- 1991—Civil War Begins
- 1994—Civil War Ends
- 2004—Transitional Federal Government



CURRENT REFUGEE SITUATION

- Lack of centralized government and inter-clan conflict have led to a decades long period without effective government
- Rampant violence, famine, and death from starvation
- Two Primary Clans Arriving— Bendair (merchants/artisans) and the Barawan (fishing community)
- More Somalis now live in Minnesota than anywhere else outside of East Africa



FOOD





- Typical Day:
 - Breakfast—flat bread, liver, and cereal or porridge
 - Lunch—Rice or noodles with sauce
 - Dinner—beans, muffo, or salad
- Milk is a staple for many rural Somalis
- Halal—foods one is allowed to eat
- Haram—forbidden foods
- Ramadan—fasting from sunup to sun down
- Typical Somali diet does not meet USDA recommendations

ETIQUETTE & NAMING

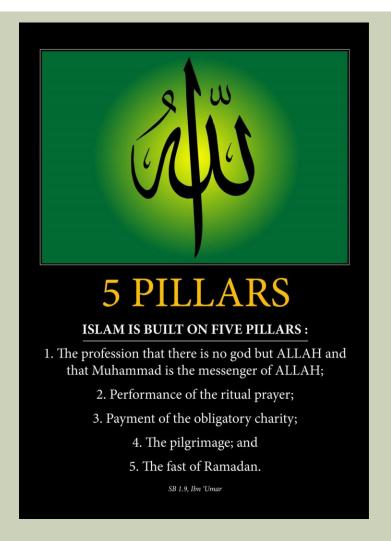
- Men and women do not usually change their name when they marry.
 - Three part name: given name (first name), father's name, and paternal grandfather's name
- Oral poetry is central to Somali life
- Only shake hands with a person of the same gender
- Inappropriate to 'wave' a patient in



RELIGION

- In Somalia, 98% of Somalis are Sunni Muslim
- Islam plays an important role in every aspect of Somali culture
- Important Religious Beliefs:
 - Importance of family and children
 - Respect for elders
 - Salat (praying 5 times a day)
 - Eating pork and drinking alcohol are forbidden
 - Ramadan (month long fast from sun up to sun down)

BEGINS July 20, 2012



GENDER ROLES



- Women are valued for their purity and piety
- Women assume higher status when they marry and have children
- While women are not considered equal to men, Somali women speak their minds and exert much power at home
- A large number of Somali women are raising children alone in the US because they were separated from their husbands during the civil war

REPRODUCTION

- High fertility rate in Somali
- Childbearing typically begins shortly after marriage
- Use term child spacing rather than family planning
- Myths about contraceptives



PREGNANCY & CHILD REARING

- In Somalia only 2% of births take place in a health care facility with a skilled attendant
- Fears about hospital births, cesarean delivery, and care of circumcisions
- Breastfeeding is common up to 2 years of age
- Diapering is not common in Somalia



FGM OR FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

- Cultural practice
- Four types of female circumcision
- 98% of Somali women are circumcised; 80% have had Type III

Unaltered female genitalia



Type I Female Circumcision



Type II Female
Circumcision



Type III Female Circumcision



MEDICAL CARE

- For many people in rural Somalia, the only health care providers are traditional healers and midwives.
- Traditional healing consists of 3 parts:
 - 1. Religious treatment
 - 2. Traditional medicine
 - 3. Traditional practical treatment
- Patients almost universally receive antibiotics or other medication at clinics



HEALTH ISSUES



- Tuberculosis (qaaxo or urug) can have the same stigma that AIDS has in Western culture
- Hepatitis is not known to be contagious and some believe it is related to constipation
- Khat (qat) may be used or abused

MENTAL HEALTH

If a person has a sickness or pain in their head, no other parts will work. -- Somali idiom

- Mental illness is highly stigmatized
- Gender-specific violence (rape and kidnapping) have been used as a weapon of war
- Descriptions of pain may sound harsh, generalized, or pervasive
- May be lower risk for suicide because of religious beliefs
- Fear of dulling effect of anti-depressants—known as 'getting injected'

MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUED

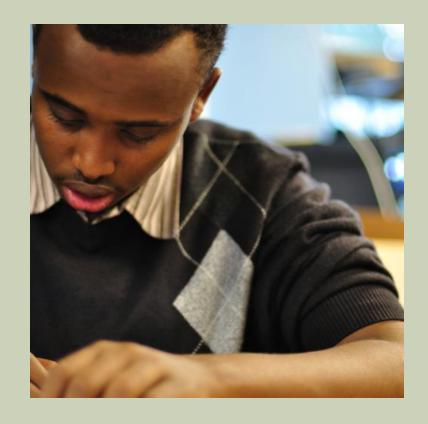
Social Stressors:

- Little formal education/illiteracy
- Single parent households common (usually female headed)
- Political/Social infrastructure so disrupted in Somalia that people have little experience and may have unrealistic expectations
- Many children



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Providers need to build rapport to address issues like female circumcision and family planning
- Females prefer to work with female interpreters and health care providers
- If no medications are given, providers should explain why
- Somalis are storytellers may need to remind them of time constraints so they have a chance to voice their concerns



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