

# Communicating with Your Vietnamese Patient

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Adapted from *Culture Clues™*, University of Washington Medical Center, November 1, 2007;  
<http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/cultureclues.html>.

*Culture Clues™* was designed by the University of Washington Medical Center to help increase awareness about concepts and preferences of patients from diverse cultures. *Culture Clues™* is to be used along with information from the patient and family to guide your communication and your patient care.

*Remember* — every person is unique; always consider the individual's beliefs, needs, and concerns.



## How does the Vietnamese culture deal with illness?

### Explaining the cause of illness and disease

- Your patient may explain illness:
  1. As an imbalance between body and nature (*yin and yang*, male and female, dark and light), and folk cures for these imbalances are expressed as “hot and cold”;
  2. As an obvious cause and effect relationship (rotten food or poisonous water), and medicinal herbs or therapeutic diets are used to cure these disorders; or
  3. As a result of germs.

### Building bridges between traditional remedies and Western health care

- Many patients will get their care from folk healers first, and will seek western medical care if the folk treatments fail. As a result, patients may present at the medical center acutely ill.
- There are a variety of common folk remedies that your patient may use, including cao gio (coin rubbing) or bat gio (skin pinching). These remedies are used to allow unwanted winds or elements to escape the body. They are not harmful, and many patients report feeling better afterwards.

### Helping your patient understand medicines

- 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 they feel better or not.

### Understanding the meaning of a hospital stay or surgery

- Your patient may see the hospital stay or surgery as the last resort before death. A visit from a clergy member may also be perceived as a death-bed visit.
- The informed consent process may be a new experience for your patient.



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

### Making decisions about health care

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- The informed consent process may be a new experience for your patient.

### Understanding communication about health care and treatments

- Your patient may nod, smile, and/or say “yes” or “ya” to acknowledge he/she heard you, rather than that he/she understands or approves. Your patient may be reluctant to say “no” to a doctor or health care provider because it may be considered disrespectful or cause disharmony.



## What are the Vietnamese culture’s norms about touch?

### Understanding personal space

- Handshakes are appropriate between men; women do not shake hands.
- Respect is shown to authority figures by giving a gentle bow and avoiding eye contact.
- Your patient may highly value emotional self-control, appearing stoic. Be aware that your patient may not show pain or ask for pain medications.
- Some elder or new immigrant patients may consider the head sacred. Avoid touching it unless necessary.

### Understanding norms about modesty

- Consider the modesty of women and girls when giving a pelvic exam. Many young nulliparous 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.



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

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