

# *tips for working with people of* **SOUTHEAST ASIAN DESCENT**

*The following tips will help the health care provider who is working with members of the Southeast Asian community.*

## **COMMUNICATION**

- Some Southeast Asians may have limited English ability, even if they speak English. When working with members of this community, it is important to remember to use basic English words, speak slowly, and give an interpreter, if available, time to interpret.
  - Use dramatic pictures to help explain to patients the consequences of not getting proper treatment.
  - Preventive medicine and some Western medical concepts may be new ideas for some members.
- Politeness and respect are important to Southeast Asians. Healthcare providers should remember the following:
  - Greet people with a friendly smile.
  - Avoid walking too far away from a person as you escort them to the an examining room.
  - Do not speak too loudly.
  - Assign consistent staff to the same person. Southeast Asians feel safe and comfortable with the same staff person.
  - Southeast Asians are more likely to trust and bond with a person than an agency.
- Do not point with your foot or finger. Avoid touching an elderly person's head without permission and an explanation.
  - In some cultures the head is considered the resting place of the soul and should be treated as sacred.
  - The feet are considered dirty and should be tucked away.
  - Pointing is considered rude.
- Addressing elders in the family is preferred when asking questions.
  - Decision-making passes through the senior male of the family, if he is present. He, and other persons in the family, may provide input. If the senior male is not present, or the family does not yet have a response from him, they may ask to postpone a decision.
- Southeast Asians are seldom confrontational, rather they are circumspect in order to allow everyone to save face. Sometimes “yes” means “no” but it is impolite to say “no.” A third party may be used to resolve issues so that there is no need for direct confrontation. When possible, avoid directly contradicting a person's opinion. Instead, describe an alternative way of understanding or a different perspective.
- Strong feelings may be muted or hidden. It is considered impolite to be too demonstrative or emotional, especially with “negative” emotions.

## PROVIDING HEALTHCARE

- Some Southeast Asians rely on traditional herbs and medicines. It is a good idea to ask if they are taking any medication from their native home. Do not assume, ask questions.
  - Use of traditional medicines is common practice. Southeast Asians may be receptive to combining traditional practices with Western treatments.
- Mental illness may be viewed in different ways depending on the culture and degree of western acculturation. It is typically considered shameful for the family.
  - Some cultures may consider signs of mental illness as a sign that a person is possessed by ghosts. Others see mental illness as bad karma – the consequence of negative behaviors in one's family or one's own past life. Mental illness may be believed to be a consequence of violating a cultural taboo or it could even be a sign of having a gift of insight into a spirit world as with a shaman.
  - Cultural approaches in dealing with mental illness vary depending on the cultural perception. These can sometimes be combined successfully with western treatments.
  - A spiritual leader may intervene with various rituals or the individual may participate in certain ritual activities to alleviate the condition. Traditional herbs may also be used as part of the healing process.

## OTHER PROBLEMS

- Domestic violence is on the increase in this community, largely because in this culture it is considered acceptable for a husband to hit his wife.
- Most Southeast Asians believe that it is okay to drink alcohol because it relieves stress. It is common to find people drinking, but rare to find alcohol abuse, although it is becoming a problem with young people.
- Substance abuse, such as smoking and illicit drugs, are becoming a problem with the youth. Some of them are getting involved with drugs because of peer pressure.
- Being fat is seen as a sign of good health. Being fat is also considered a positive thing because it means you are getting enough food and are not poor to the point of starvation.
- Most people do not participate in organized sports or specific forms of physical activity. However, most Southeast Asians, especially the men, have physically-demanding jobs. Outside of their jobs, they do not reserve time for working out.
- Most Southeast Asians agree that it is more challenging to bring up children in the United States.