



PRIDE IN OUR DIVERSITY

The following information is provided to help you become more aware of your patients and co-workers views, traditions, and actions. While you can use this information as a guide, keep in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your patients and their families about specific beliefs, practices, and customs that may be relevant and important during medical treatment and hospitalization.

When describing the Italian culture, the following information could apply to Italians visiting from Italy, first generation Italian Americans, or ensuing generations of Italian Americans. Each piece of information does not necessarily apply to all Italians.



general information

- ✓ You should formally address patients and family members, especially adults (i.e., Mr./Mrs.), and keep the conversation serious or casual as appropriate for the situation.
- ✓ Family is important for the Italian culture. Patients may wish to have a family member present 24 hours a day.
- ✓ A great majority of Italians are Roman Catholic. Rome is the seat of the papacy and one of the first Christian states.
- ✓ Many Italians, especially older patients, may bring in objects of religious meaning, such as sacred pictures, rosaries, or a prayer book. Such objects should be left where they are, unless specifically requested by the patient.

inter-personal relationships

relationship roles

- ✓ Traditionally the Italian culture is male dominated, especially among the older population.
- ✓ Some male patients may be uncomfortable around female doctors and nurses.

decision-making

- ✓ It is important to involve the whole Italian family in all aspects of any major decision regarding the patient's health.
- ✓ Family members consult with each other, making decisions and approaching the doctor as a group. Usually only one person, the one that is most knowledgeable, speaks but he/she does so for the entire family.

conflict resolution

- ✓ In general Italians are very assertive and demonstrative. They like to talk and make jokes, and are very personable.
- ✓ Religion does not usually play a role in determining what is best for the patient.
- ✓ As with many other cultures, if there is disagreement, it may be necessary to bring in an unbiased third party, or back up your information with a publication. To prevent any ongoing bitterness, a sincere apology may ease any tension.

personal space

- ✓ Italians are expressive, and respond to care and touch.
- ✓ Until Italians become familiar with you, they might want to keep their distance.

gestures

- ✓ Italian people are demonstrative. When familiar people greet each other, it is common to embrace and kiss each other's cheek, or offer a long handshake.
- ✓ If someone doesn't know or doesn't care about something they shrug their shoulders.
- ✓ A knock on the head indicates that that person is crazy.

treatment issues

medical treatment

- ✓ The doctor is seen as an authority figure; therefore he/she should give the family any bad news.
- ✓ Any bad news should be delivered to a patient first, who can then relay it to his family. Parents should be notified first in case of a child.
- ✓ Some older patients may be afraid of doctors and hospitals. It may be necessary to speak to a family member so he/she can talk to the patient.
- ✓ Italian patients want to know the state of their condition, and do not want to be shielded from the truth
- ✓ Italian patients like attention and company.

emotions

- ✓ In general Italian women usually express their emotions, and men do so as well, although to a lesser extent.
- ✓ Although Italians are quite congenial and expressive on most occasions, they can be somber about sickness and death.
- ✓ Patients may respond to human touch, a personalized approach, and a caring attitude.

food

- ✓ Bread, pasta, cheese, vegetables, and fruits are the staples of the Italian diet. Italians like their food fresh and fragrant with spices.
- ✓ Italians have made significant contributions to the world's cuisine for good, simple, exquisitely- prepared dishes.
- ✓ Many Italians abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent (40 days before Easter), and some abstain from meat on all Fridays of the year.
- ✓ Other than fasting, there are generally no restrictions regarding food.

death

- ✓ Patients may want to receive communion before death. You should ask the patient's family for direction if death is imminent.
- ✓ If the patient wants a priest, a Roman Catholic priest should be contacted.
- ✓ Many people, both family and friends may want to be present when the patient is dying.

did you know



? Italians in the United States continue to identify with people from their own region, as well as with Italians in general. Historically those from the Northern region in Italy have paid more attention to language retention in the US and were more familiar with the industrial and urban settings, while the Southern region produced more small-business people who come from rural towns in Italy.

g l o s s a r y

word	meaning
Arrivederci/Ciao	Goodbye
Grazie	Thank you
Salve	Hello
Madre	Mother
Si	Yes
No	No
Acqua	Water
Prego Benevenuta	You're Welcome (f)
Prego Benevenuto	You're Welcome (m)
Padre	Father
Moito	A lot
Como sta	How are you?
Buono	Good
Cattivo	Bad
Per favore	Please

important holidays & dates

Event	Date	Description
New Year	January 1	Marks the first day of the New Year.
Epiphany	January 6	The feast of three kings.
Liberation Day	April 25	Celebrates the liberation of Italy following World War II.
Easter	Varies '99 April 4 '00 April 23 '01 April 15	Celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
All Saints' Day	November 1	Catholic feast to celebrate the saints and martyrs of the church. Marked with visitations to the cemeteries and the graves of family and friends.
Christmas	December 25	Marks the birth of Jesus Christ.
St. Stephen's Day	December 26	Marks the death of the first Christian Martyr St. Stephen.

Sources

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