The Orthodox Jewish Community

A brief guide for hospital staff

This information will help answer any questions you may have while caring for our Orthodox Jewish patients. Please offer your patients and visitors the Jewish Resources brochure, available behind the main desk, at maternity nurse stations, and in the Chaplaincy office located in redbrick building number 1 (ext. 4043).

Background

Many religious couples have a Rabbi whom they trust to help decide issues of Jewish law that pertain to their situation. You may see a range of practices depending on the couple’s background and level of religious observance.

Nearly all Jewish laws are allowed to be broken in order to save a life. A complicated pregnancy, as well as labor and delivery will often fall into this category.

Some religious obligations such as fasting on specific days, may be suspended or altered to preserve/enhance a patient’s health.

Many Orthodox married women don’t show their natural hair to men outside their immediate family and will cover it with a wig, a scarf, or a hat. Additionally, skirts and sleeves below the elbow are customary. Husbands will usually wear a head covering (yarmulke).

General Concerns

There are a number of concerns caregivers must be aware of when treating Orthodox Jewish patients:

- **Physical contact** between staff and a patient or family member of the opposite gender should be kept to medical necessity. Even shaking hands during introductions should be avoided.

- Under the rubric of **modesty**, some males may avoid direct eye contact with a female staff member. This does not imply that they are inattentive to what you are saying.

- hospital stays that extend over the Sabbath (a.k.a. Shabbat or Shabbos) or major Jewish holidays (a.k.a. Yom Tov or Chag). See below for more details.

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Sabbath / Holiday related concerns

Holidays are defined here as the 2 days of Rosh Hashana and Shavuot, Yom Kippur (often viewed as the Holiest day of the year), and the first and last 2 days of Sukkot and Passover (a.k.a. Pesach). Like Sabbath, these days begin at dusk (when it begins to get dark) and conclude with sunset (fully dark) the following night.

Hospitalization over Sabbath or a major Jewish Holiday presents unique challenges for the observant Jew (both patients and visitors). These Holy Days and their accompanying laws (mentioned in or derived from the Bible) are designed to engender rest from creative acts in order to assert and reaffirm God’s role as ultimate Creator. Among the restrictions are:

- triggering electrical devices including doors, hospital beds, or lights
- using telecommunications or call bells
- driving
- engaging in monetary transactions
- writing - even signing their name. (Hospital protocol allows provision of verbal consent that is witnessed by a staff member).

Jewish law advocates that those who are sick, in labor, or have just given birth may perform these actions if necessary for their health. However, many of our patients are used to observing the Sabbath in a particular way. The thought or suggestion of breaking from their routine may cause undue anxiety.

Therefore, here are a few things to consider:

a) Check with the patient before leaving a light on or off in their room.

b) Offer a manual (non-electronic) call bell if they are anxious about how to call a staff member.

c) Some patients or visitors uncomfortable with asking others to do a ‘prohibited’ Sabbath activity may hint to you to perform the action rather than ask outright.

Here are some examples:

- “My bed is a bit low” - they may want their bed raised.
- “It’s hot in here” - they may be asking you to adjust the room temperature
- “I’m not sure what to do, the grape juice and challah rolls never arrived with my meal” – they may be asking you to call dietary to request the missing menu items
- “The food seems cold” – they may be asking you to reheat their food. **Note:** Please be sure the food remains packaged in the same

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way as the patient hands it to you for reheating. Most orthodox patients will not eat the food if it looks like the packaging was removed or tampered with on the way to them.

- A visitor may ask “how do I leave the floor?” – They may be hoping you will walk ahead of them and press the elevator button to trigger an electronic door to open.

d) A relative wishing to stay with the patient over Sabbath/Holiday because they do not drive on the Sabbath will appreciate the opportunity to sleep in a “sleeper chair” next to the bedside. If this is not practical, or for an additional family member, overnight accommodation on campus can be arranged via Guest Services (x4837).

Please also inform them about the Bikkur Cholim resource room on 4 Tower. Note: this room is not for sleeping overnight.

e) Please discuss discharge plans with your patient if their anticipated discharge falls during a period when a Holiday begins at the conclusion of Sabbath on Saturday evening. If so, 3-consecutive Holy Days will occur ending on Monday evening.

In this situation, some patients will choose to pre-pay with a local cab company and leave their number with you (or in their chart) so that the cab can be called for them at discharge.

If a patient is adamant that they are unable to leave campus during this period, see above note regarding possibility of coordinating accommodation on campus through the chaplaincy department.

For those that would be comfortable with being driven home by a cab but didn’t have an opportunity to pre-pay, there are taxi-vouchers available at the discretion of the nurse managers to facilitate their discharge on the Holiday.

e) Please offer your orthodox patients an open box of tissues as an alternative to tearing toilet roll. (Acts of tearing/destruction are forbidden on the Sabbath/Holiday)

f) Electric Sabbath candles are available from the volunteer office (x4947) or directly from maternity nurse stations to welcome in the Sabbath before sundown on Friday or Holidays.

g) Extra challah (bread) rolls and grape juice are available by calling food services at Ext. 4110. (On the Sabbath itself, please offer to call on behalf of the patient.)
If visitors arrive without food provisions for Sabbath or a Holiday, a cold
guest tray (comprised of challah and tuna/egg) can be requested from
dietary on their behalf at no charge. They may also be guided to the bikkur
cholim room on 4 Tower that will have supplies to tide them over till after
the Sabbath. It is also a quiet place to pray. (At other times they can avail
themselves of the kosher sandwiches or salads in the cafeteria.)

Visitors looking to store food brought from home, can be directed to the
bikkur cholim room’s refrigerator, or the fridge in post-partum’s kitchen
area.

Patients that are likely to be here for extended periods will appreciate
being offered (or may ask for) a small fridge to store kosher food in their
room. These are available from engineering ext. 4235.

Before each Holiday, dietary accepts requests for pre-paid guest trays.
Visitors expecting to be here over a Holiday will be grateful for the
opportunity to receive a full hot meal by pre-paying (usually $15/tray) at
the cashier’s office near the Monti lobby. If they were unable to pay prior to
the onset of the Holiday, guest trays can still be requested on their behalf
and they should be instructed to pay at the conclusion of the Holiday in the
cafeteria or in the cashier’s office.

**Please call the Department of Chaplaincy Care and Education for any
additional questions or suggestions at Ext. 4043.**

See also the Chaplaincy’s “Staff and family guide upon expiration of a Jewish
patient.”