

Caring for Afghan Newcomers: Discussion Guide with Questions and Answers

IMMIGRANT HEALTH MATTERS

NOTE: Discussion guides for [Immigrant Health Matters](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/ihtmatters.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/ihtmatters.html) are linked to each scenario and are meant to be used by clinical and public health staff and clinicians to guide conversation about the topic. Leaders in clinics and educational training programs, such as schools of medicine, global health residency programs, social work, or nursing are encouraged to use these materials for training purposes. Discussion guides are designed to address commonly asked questions about newcomer health. Broad answers are provided for the discussion leader, but the overall goal is to encourage questions and dialogue among participants.

1. How should I prepare to effectively communicate with Afghan newcomers?

Interpreters

Use professional medical interpreters, arranged ahead of time if needed. The most common languages among Afghan newcomers are Dari and Pashto; less common languages include English, Hazaragi (related to Farsi), Uzbek, and others. The use of a professional medical interpreter is essential for communicating effectively, improving the quality of care, and building a trusting relationship. Professional medical interpreters allow the healthcare provider and the patient to use their preferred languages and ensure greater understanding on both sides. It is important to avoid using family members as interpreters for accuracy of information and confidentiality.

Gender concordance

Many Afghan newcomers prefer to have gender-concordant healthcare practitioners and interpreters. Assess whether patients prefer to have a gender-concordant healthcare team prior to their appointment and make appropriate arrangements as able. Accommodating these preferences can improve patients' experience and health. If it is not possible, explain this to the patient so they can anticipate this during their appointment.

Culture

Practice cultural humility, openness, and curiosity. This is important whenever working with newcomers who have different cultures and experiences of healthcare. Make an effort to understand your patient's culture. This facilitates effective communication, builds a stronger rapport, and allows culturally informed and patient centered care. For example, Afghan newcomers may not be familiar with Western terms for certain diagnoses, especially mental health conditions, in part due to stigma and limited access to mental health care in Afghanistan. You can learn more about Afghan culture through resources like the Minnesota Center of Excellence's Afghan Refugee and Humanitarian Parolee Health Profile listed below.

Recent events and travel history

Look into recent regional events that may impact Afghan newcomers' health needs. For example, urgent and unplanned displacement may impact health and access to pre-departure healthcare and medical exams. Consider asking Afghan newcomers about their travel history, assessing for vaccination gaps, and screening for communicable and chronic diseases as appropriate. Keep in mind that events in Afghanistan may continue to impact Afghan newcomers.

Learn about your individual patient

As with all of your patients, getting to know your patient as an individual and their unique needs is critical to effectively communicating and building trust. This process may include learning about the patient's previous education and career, and their role within the family, especially regarding making medical decisions.

- [MN Center of Excellence: Afghan Clinical Guidance](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/afghan.html)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/afghan.html>)
- [Afghanistan in 2018: A Survey of the Afghan People](https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2018-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/) (<https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2018-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>)
- [Implications of Language Barriers for Healthcare: A Systematic Review](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7201401/)
(<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7201401/>)
- [Interpreter services and effect on healthcare - a systematic review of the impact of different types of interpreters on patient outcome](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9932446/) (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9932446/>)
- [CDC: Post-Arrival Medical Screening of Newly Arrived Refugees, Immigrants, and Migrants](https://www.cdc.gov/yellow-book/hcp/refugees-immigrants-migrants/post-arrival-medical-screening.html)
(<https://www.cdc.gov/yellow-book/hcp/refugees-immigrants-migrants/post-arrival-medical-screening.html>)

2. What are the primary health concerns for Afghan newcomers?

After three decades of war and political instability, Afghanistan's healthcare system faces continued instability. Lack of access to medical care, healthcare workers, and health infrastructure have left many Afghans with unmet health needs. Most Afghans living in Afghanistan and neighboring countries may not have had access to primary health care. Primary health considerations for Afghan newcomers, therefore, include chronic illness and infectious disease. **Healthcare providers should be particularly attentive to key priority health conditions including anemia, lead toxicity, mental health, pediatric malnutrition, tuberculosis, and vaccine preventable diseases.** For more in-depth information on health considerations for Afghan newcomers:

- [MN Center of Excellence: Afghan Refugee and Humanitarian Parolee Health Profile](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/profiles/afghan.html)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/profiles/afghan.html>)
- [Infectious diseases in Afghanistan: Strategies for health system improvement](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10728369/)
(<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10728369/>)

3. How can interorganizational teams cooperate to improve healthcare for Afghan families?

Cooperation between healthcare organizations and other entities, such as local community-based organizations (CBO), national or international non-governmental organizations (NGO), and governmental agencies, can improve standards of care by optimizing specialized resources and addressing knowledge and service gaps. For example, while healthcare teams provide for the physical and mental health of individuals, CBOs can assist with connections to community and cultural environments as well as key immigration services. NGOs may offer further programmatic support, and government agencies often have information on additional benefits and support services available to newcomers. Cooperation between these partners therefore allows for continuity of support, care, and orientation to the US health system.

- [MN Center of Excellence: Afghan Culture and Health Screening Considerations](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/webinars.html#afghans)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/webinars.html#afghans>)

4. What additional resources can providers integrate into their practice?

Telehealth technologies like phone and video calls can facilitate providers connecting with patients and interpreters to improve patient access to care and simplify the interpretation process. Translated video education may also support culturally and linguistically accessible care. MN COE Connect has several useful online newcomer health tools, including health education videos in Dari and Pashto, CareRef (an interactive, population-specific guide to the domestic medical exam), Clinical FAQs, and links to clinical guidance, and health education resources and trainings.

Online trainings on cultural and trauma-informed care are important and readily available through different organizations like the MN COE, Migration Health Initiative and Switchboard. Trainings specific to Afghan history and culture can also increase understanding of the specific health impact of conflict and instability in Afghanistan as well as the unique cultural and trauma-informed care required to respond. Knowledge of health risks common for Afghan newcomers can also provide valuable information when deciding how to proceed with care. Working directly with newcomers often involves providing health education and advocacy of interpretation, equal rights, and culturally informed care: [Key Clinical and Cultural Considerations for the Domestic Medical Screening \(www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/screen.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/screen.html). Several examples of Afghan-specific resources are listed below.

- [MN Center of Excellence: MN COE Connect \(https://mn-coe-connect.web.health.state.mn.us/\)](https://mn-coe-connect.web.health.state.mn.us/)
- [MN Center of Excellence: Afghan Clinical Guidance \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/afghan.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/afghan.html)
- [MN Center of Excellence: OB-GYN Care for Afghans: A Toolkit for Clinicians \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/obafghan/index.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/clinical/obafghan/index.html)
- [MN Center of Excellence: Newcomer Education for Wellness \(NEW\) Video Series \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/newvideo/index.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/newvideo/index.html)
- [MN Center of Excellence: Afghan Refugee and Humanitarian Parolee Health Profile \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/profiles/afghan.html\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/profiles/afghan.html)
- [MN Center of Excellence: Afghan Culture and Health Screening Considerations \(https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/webinars.html#afghans\)](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/coe/webinars.html#afghans)
- [Switchboard: Afghan Resources \(https://www.switchboardta.org/?s=afghans&post_type=&submit=\)](https://www.switchboardta.org/?s=afghans&post_type=&submit=)
- [Migration Health Institute: Afghan Health Collection \(https://mhi.taskforce.org/health-education/afghan-health-education/\)](https://mhi.taskforce.org/health-education/afghan-health-education/)

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