# Cultural Considerations in Health Assessment

This tip sheet lists issues that should be considered when conducting health assessments with clients from migrant and refugee backgrounds. These issues can affect a client’s health status and their understanding of health and illness, and also impact on future care plans.

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| Ethnicity and country of birth | • This information can be an indicator of the client’s culture, traditions, customs, health beliefs and preferred languages.  
Remember that:  
*Ethnicity may be more significant than country of birth. For example, clients may have been born in a country where their parents lived briefly.* |
| Preferred language | • May indicate the need for an interpreter  
Remember that:  
*Preferred language may not be related to country of birth.*  
*It is the health professional’s responsibility to ensure that communication is conducted in the preferred language of the client, and can be understood by the client. This is a Victorian Government requirement at critical points of communication.* |
| Literacy | • May affect the client’s capacity to respond to written information provided during the assessment.  
• May indicate the client’s social status and education level in their previous country of residence or origin.  
Remember that:  
*Clients may rely on family members to read and explain written information.*  
*Clients and their families may not be literate in the language they prefer to speak.* |
| Interpreter preferences | - Identifying an appropriate interpreter, and ensuring that the client is comfortable using an interpreter, is essential for clear and appropriate communication.  
  
  Remember that:  
  - *The client may not be familiar with using an interpreter: you may need to explain the process.*  
  - *Clients may have concerns about the confidentiality of interpreters.*  
  - *There is a small chance that the client may know the interpreter, which may raise privacy concerns.*  
  - *Consider client preferences regarding the gender and ethnicity of the interpreter, and whether an on-site or telephone interpreter is preferred.*  
  - *Only qualified interpreters should be used: the client’s family members should not be used as interpreters.* |
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| Migration status and experience | - Stress and trauma resulting from pre-migration, migration or post-migration experiences can greatly affect a client’s health and wellbeing.  
  - Visa status can affect access to subsidised health services. |
| Beliefs about health and illness | - Clients’ beliefs and past experience affect the way they view health, causes of illness and treatment.  
  - Understanding and acknowledging the client’s health beliefs and practices is an important step in creating a mutually acceptable care plan. |
| Understanding of the health system | - Clients may not be familiar with the structure of the health service system or how to access various services.  
  - Clients may not be familiar with health system processes (eg waiting lists for hospitals, Medicare support, etc) |
| Family and social support | - The responsibility for care may not lie only with the client: other people, including extended family, may assume responsibility for care.  
  
  Remember that:  
  - *In some cultures, ‘family’ may include non-related individuals.*  
  - *A client’s social support networks may be limited.*  
  - *A client may be able to access support through community organisations.* |
| Religious practices | - Clients may wish to access spiritual or religious leaders  
  - Particular times for prayer may be important  
  - Religious practices may occasionally conflict with treatment plans.  
  - Particular customs may need to be followed during birth, illness and death and dying |
| Dietary practices | - There may be religious restrictions on food consumption  
  - Some foods may have cultural meanings for clients (eg the belief that certain foods are beneficial or harmful to health) |

**Further information**  
The Centre for Culture, Ethnicity & Health runs workshops on conducting health assessments and understanding health beliefs. Visit www.ceh.org.au to view our training calendar or book a workshop for your organisation.