

# Vietnam

## COMMUNICATION

### Languages and Dialects

- Official spoken languages: Vietnamese
- Other languages and dialects include English, French, Chinese, and Khmer, among others.

### Greetings

Proper and specific greetings are very important to Vietnamese people.

- Acceptable greetings include a handshake, a verbal greeting, a polite bow, or a nod of the head.
- Wait for a woman to extend her hand before offering a handshake.
- Consider asking after a person's family as you greet them; doing so is customary in Vietnam.
- Elders receive extra respect. If an older person extends a hand, hold it in both your hands as part of your greeting. If they do not extend a hand, bow respectfully. During the greeting, keep your gaze lower than the gaze of the older person.
- When addressing a group of people, greet them in order of age, acknowledging the older people first.

### Names and Titles

- Vietnamese people prefer to be addressed using titles. Use an appropriate title along with the person's first name.
- Titles indicating family connection (for example, 'Uncle' or 'Aunt') may be used in addition to professional titles.
- The Vietnamese order their names as follows: surname (or family name), middle name, given name.
- Many Vietnamese first names are gender neutral.

### Conversation

- Vietnamese people value balance and harmony in conversation.
- In an effort to avoid confrontation or disrespect, a Vietnamese person may not express disagreement; they may also avoid answering a question.
- Do not assume that nodding or responding 'yes' to questions means that a person understands or agrees. This response may be a sign of respect to the speaker.
- Vietnamese people may often pause with thoughtful purpose or intent while engaged in conversation; do not attempt to 'fill in' these deliberate silences.
- Vietnamese people may favor words that are balanced in tone ('good') over more vivid expressions ('fantastic'); in Vietnam, those who express themselves vividly could be viewed as insincere.
- A laugh may indicate a patient's nervousness, rather than expressing humor (or a desire to ridicule a speaker).
- In Vietnam, some people believe that sparing a person's feelings is more important than speaking the truth.



### Non-Verbal Signals

- Many Vietnamese people will smile easily and often, regardless of the underlying emotion; therefore, a smile cannot automatically be interpreted as happiness or agreement.
- Patients from Vietnam may avoid making eye contact with healthcare professionals as a sign of respect. A lack of eye contact should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of embarrassment, disagreement, or lack of interest.
- In Vietnam, people rarely touch or hug in public.

### Making Non-Verbal Signals

- Hugs are reserved for close friends or relatives, and they comprise only part of a greeting.
- Use both hands to pass or to receive an object.
- When seated, avoid pointing the soles of your feet at another person; feet are considered unclean.
- To summon a person with a gesture, move the entire hand towards the body, fingers pointing downward or to the side.
- The symbol for 'okay' in the U.S. (forefinger meets the tip of the thumb to form a circle) means 'poor quality' in Vietnam.
- Winking or pointing at a Vietnamese person, putting your hands in your pockets, or patting another person's back may be considered rude.

## CULTURAL NORMS

### Patient and Provider Interaction

#### 'Face'

- In Vietnam, the concept of 'face' includes self-respect, honor, and social agency. 'Face' can be conferred to one person by another: when you show respect to a Vietnamese person, you 'give them face'.
- A person can also feel they have 'lost face' if they behave inappropriately, or if they receive criticism in public.

### Age and Gender Hierarchy in Families

- In keeping with religious precepts, some Vietnamese people believe in a system of hierarchies related to age and gender.
- Vietnamese people commonly act in the interest of the family as a whole, rather than thinking individually.

## Collective Decision Making

- Grown children do not often keep secrets from their parents, unless the children have a significant ideological difference.
- A person will often defer to decisions made by older male family members, disagreeing only when they can do so with great respect.
- Health-related decisions could also be based on advice from family members, neighbors, or friends.
- Female patients may allow husbands to make decisions for them.

## Behavior in Clinic

- Vietnamese people are punctual; they expect others to arrive on time for meetings.
- Avoid sitting or standing at a level more elevated than an older person.
- Due to language barriers, Vietnamese patients may not ask many questions in clinic.
- Vietnamese people may not disclose that they are in pain.
- Practitioners should emphasize the dangers associated with decreasing doses of TB medications.
- Many Vietnamese respond to challenges reactively, as they come up, rather than proactively, in an attempt to prevent a problem. Those who believe in a predetermined future may feel resigned to challenging situations, including diagnoses.

## TRADITIONAL IDEAS AND BELIEFS

### Traditional Belief in Four Types of TB

Some Vietnamese people believe TB has four types:

- *Lao truyen*, or hereditary TB, is believed to be passed across generations through the blood.
- *Lao luc*, or physical TB, is believed to be caused by hard work and poverty, with men believed to be more affected.
- *Lao tam*, or mental TB, is believed to be caused by excessive worrying or unhappiness, with women believed to be more affected.
- *Lao phoi* is considered to be the most dangerous form of TB, and the only contagious form. Some believe it is caused by TB germs and transmitted through the respiratory system. Men are believed to be more affected.

### Common Causal Beliefs about TB

Some Vietnamese people believe germs that cause TB are already present in everybody, and they may attribute the development of TB to one or more of the following:

- Overwork
- Malnutrition
- Lack of sleep
- Excessive stress
- Use of alcohol or cigarettes
- Poor hygiene
- Sharing utensils or food
- Genetic predisposition
- Exposure to the elements, particularly during weather changes
- God's decision
- Supernatural causes

## Beliefs about TB Transmission

Some Vietnamese people, including patients, may believe that TB could be transmitted in one or more of the following ways:

- Exposure to polluted or dusty environments;
- Sharing eating utensils or food with an infected person.

## Stigma and TB

Although stigmatizing practices continue to exist, do not assume all Vietnamese patients and their families will believe the misperceptions listed here.

Some people may believe that TB cannot be detected early and that it is not curable. These people may view a TB diagnosis as a 'death sentence'; these misperceptions can lead to stigmatizing beliefs and behaviors.

- Among the Vietnamese, TB may be seen as a 'dirty' disease, and TB patients may be viewed as 'someone you look down upon'.
- TB patients may be made to eat and sleep separately from others, and may have only limited contact with family members.
- Concerns regarding transmission of TB may lead to the social isolation of both TB patients and their families.
- TB patients may fear 'losing face' in society, not having friends, losing a job, or deportation if they admit to having TB symptoms or a diagnosis of TB.

## TREATMENT CONSIDERATIONS

### Medications and Vaccines

- Some Vietnamese people may believe medications given by injection are more potent than oral medication.
- Some people may believe Western medicines are 'too strong', and that the dosages prescribed are 'too much' for a person of Asian descent.
- Some Vietnamese people may believe that the BCG vaccine will protect them from *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*.
- Some people may believe the TB medication is needed only if a person is suffering from *Lao luc*, or physical TB.

### Traditional Remedies

- The practice of traditional medicine remains an important part of the health care system.
- Some Vietnamese may attribute tuberculosis to problems with hygiene; other ideas for treatment may include eliminating mold or mildew, improving nutrition, or moving to a new climate.
- Some Vietnamese people contribute illnesses to an imbalance between the body's 'cold' and 'hot' forces.
- Illnesses, foods, medications, and herbs are classified as 'hot' or 'cold'. Western medicine is considered 'hot'; traditional herbs are considered 'cold'.