

# South Asian Communities and Infertility



A resource for health care  
professionals

## What is 'South Asian'?

Older people may feel more strongly about traditional aspects of South Asian

culture than young people born in Britain, but individual views vary a great deal. It is never possible to predict what is important to individual people and so it is important never to make assumptions about cultural differences. Always ask the patient and listen sensitively.

## How big is the South Asian population?

### Asian and Asian British groups in the 2001 census

Ethnic group	Count	% total population	% minority
Bangladeshi	283,063	0.5	6.1
Other Asian	247,664	0.4	5.3
Total	2,332,323	4.0	41.4

Half of all South Asians were born and educated in the UK and are the children and grandchildren of people who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Some Bangladeshi women will have moved here more recently to join their husbands. Inter-continental marriage still occurs and some spouses therefore will be more recent arrivals.

## What languages do South Asians speak?

Everyone born in the UK speaks English. There are also speakers of Punjabi (including the Mirpuri dialect); Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati (including the Kutchi dialect), Pashto, Bengali (including the Sylheti dialect). Many South Asians can speak or understand several languages, some East Africans also speak Swahili and some people brought up in the UK may not speak any South Asian language (DOH 2004).

When organising interpreters it is very important to check the dialect, especially for those who say they speak Punjabi or Bengali or Gujarati (see above). Confidentiality is very important and patients may want to know the name of the interpreter. Working well with an interpreter requires conscious and careful management. Guidelines are available in Henley and Schott (1999).

Evidence shows that using informal interpreters (relatives and friends) often leads to translations which are inaccurate and unreliable. Misunderstandings, mistranslations and omissions are alarmingly high, even when health professionals think the interview has gone reasonably well. Bias and distortion can occur and embarrassment is common. This is especially likely in discussions of infertility. In some cultures, husbands and wives may not feel able to discuss these issues together and may not know the relevant words either in English or their first language.

**Confidentiality is very important. This is especially the case in small communities where many people know each other and news travels fast. Breaches of confidentiality can have serious consequences.**

### **Is religion important?**

Religion is likely to be important to many South Asian people, though individuals vary considerably (just as in the white 'Christian' population) in terms of how religious guidelines influence behaviour. This can never be assumed.

South Asians in the UK are religiously very diverse. The 2001 census asked a question on religion for the first time, so there is now more reliable data on ethnicity and religion (see [www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001)).

**Indians** are religiously diverse - 45 % are Hindu, 29% Sikh and 13% Muslim.

**Pakistani and Bangladeshi** groups are more homogenous – 92% are Muslims

It is not possible here to give specific details of the characteristics of each South Asian religion or culture. For an excellent resource on cross-cultural healthcare see: Henley and Schott (1999). For issues specific to nursing see: Culley & Dyson (2001). Information on South Asian religions is available on the websites listed below.

It is important to consider that culturally and religiously, certain aspects of care may be important to people. There are different cultural conventions about:

- Modesty and privacy
- Body space
- Clothing and Jewellery
- Washing and cleanliness
- Food and diet
- Family structure and relationships
- Naming systems and forms of address
- Religious beliefs and practices (e.g. Muslims are *culturally* diverse)





Community understanding of infertility, especially among older generations, is

## Sources of information for professionals:

### Information about South Asian religions is available online at:

<http://www.ethnicityonline.net/>

Ethnicity Online website, created to address the need for understanding of ethnic differences in healthcare.

<http://www.sikhs.org/>

Information about Sikhism

<http://www.hindu.org/>

Information about Hinduism

<http://www.islamonline.net>

Information about Islam

### Say 'hello' in Hindi? For useful phrases in South Asian (and other) languages see:

<http://www.elite.net/~runner/jennifers/>

### When is Ramadan, Divali or the Birthday of Guru Nanak?

A calendar of all religious festivals is produced by Shap and available at:

<http://www.support4learning.org.uk/shap/>

### Books:

**Religions in the UK: Directory 2001-2003** (3<sup>rd</sup> edn) (2001) Weller, Paul.

Published by the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, in association with the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom

ISBN: 0 901437 96 4

**Culture, Religion and Patient Care in a Multi-Ethnic Society. A handbook for professionals** (1999) Henley, A. & Schott, J. London: Age Concern

## Useful sources of information for patients:

**NHS Direct online:** <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>

**CHILD:** The National Infertility Support Network. Providing high quality support and information to those suffering from infertility in Great Britain.  
<http://www.child.org.uk/>

Department of Health (2004) Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies. Department of Health: The Equality and Human Rights Group.

**ISSUE:** ISSUE's support includes counselling and telephone counselling; putting you in touch with support groups locally; online support including a 24hours a day newsgroup. <http://www.issue.co.uk/>

**The Daisy Network:** A registered charity and support group for women suffering premature menopause. <http://www.daisynetwork.org.uk/>

**Empty Arms:** This site is for women dealing with Endometriosis and Infertility. <http://www.emptyarms.co.uk/>

**ACeBabes:** Site/ organisation for families following assisted conception.  
<http://www.acebabes.co.uk>

## Good American sites include:

**RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association.** Provides timely, compassionate support and information to people who are experiencing <http://www.resolve.org/>

**FertilityPlus:** Information written by patients for patients. A non-profit website for patient information on trying to conceive. The site owners are not professionals, but are rather providing information that is written by patients for patients.  
<http://www.fertilityplus.org/>



## References

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- Nazroo, J.Y. (1997) *The Health of Ethnic Minorities*. London: Policy Studies Institute

The information in this leaflet is based on the study: *Informing Policy and Practice: A Study of the Provision of Infertility Services to British South Asian Communities*, which was conducted by researchers in the Faculty of Health & Life Sciences at De Montfort University, Leicester. If you would like to know more about this research project, please contact Nicky Hudson on 0116 2078766, email: [nhudson@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:nhudson@dmu.ac.uk)

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