▶ What your Somali patients need you to know

Ramadan is the holy month of fasting; the dates change with the lunar calendar. Muslims are obliged to fast from food and water from sun-up to sun-down. Individuals with chronic conditions, who are pregnant, or who are not well enough to fast (including people with diabetes) are free from this requirement—however many still choose to fast. Asking your patients if they choose to fast for Ramadan and *withholding judgment on their decision* may prevent a misunderstanding related to medication during this month.

Many Somalis would rather not use any long term medication at all, so it is good to have a discussion about what regimen would best suit their goals. For individuals who rely on medications, it may be more feasible to standardize the time they take prescribed medications by aligning their medication schedule with prayer times, rather than meal times. Prayer times are: before sunrise (Fajr, "FAH-jir"), approximately 1pm (Dhuhr, "DO-hehr"), approximately 4pm (Asr, "AH-sir"), sunset (Maghrib, "MAH-grib"), and after sunset (Isha, "EE-shah").

It is acceptable to give a prescription to eat more fruits and vegetables, or a prescription to walk for 20 minutes each day. The cultural respect that Somalis hold for physicians means that it is likely that a prescription such as these would be taken very seriously.

WellShare International

WellShare is a public health non-profit based in Minneapolis, Minnesota serving immigrant and refugee communities, that works to improve the health of women, children, and their communities around the world using the Community Health Worker model.

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We welcome your thoughts, questions, and suggestions!

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A provider's guide to communicating with diabetic and pre-diabetic Somali patients

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▶ Somalis in the United States and pre-diabetes

The increased prevalence of chronic diseases suffered by Somalis living in the United States may be attributable to changes in diet and a reduction in daily physical activity. Back home, Somalis had less access to unhealthy foods and more daily physical activity.

There are many reasons that Somalis suffer from chronic disease in the United States. Similar to other Americans, some Somalis do not like to exercise, feel unsafe exercising outdoors in their neighborhoods, fear injuries, or face barriers to exercise like lack of appropriate apparel or inability to afford costly memberships. Some Somalis are not accustomed to the taste of "health foods" like whole wheat flour and brown rice, cannot afford to shop based on nutrition guidelines, and engage in emotional eating. Before arriving in the US, the food that Somalis ate was mainly un-processed, and Somalis were not exposed to the concept of measuring portion sizes, monitoring calories, or tracking intake of food and drinks. The major issues facing many Somali immigrants are that they have not been exposed to the concept of balanced nutrition, and that they over-eat refined sugar and oil. **Many Somalis truly do not know the health consequences of over-eating and under-exercising.**

▶ Somali cultural foods (and how to adapt them to be healthier)

A typical Somali meal is a large dinner plate piled with rice or spaghetti, with a meat sauce on top, and bread, "anjera", to scoop up the food. When served, vegetables portions are small; oftentimes a banana accompanies the meal. Traditional meals heavily relied on milk from camels, goats, and cows, and the meat of sheep, goats, camels, and cows. Spiced tea is not only a Somali standard, but it is a critical part of how Somalis socialize and welcome company. The tea is strongly sweetened with sugar, as Somalis generally prefer very sweet tea and coffee.

When exposed to fruits and vegetables, many Somalis enjoy the taste of produce. Encouraging patients to incorporate dried beans and lentils into their meals—partially replacing meat—is another way to save money and increase nutrition. Increasing the amount of produce; taking the focus away from meat; incorporating whole grains; and reducing oil, sugar, and portion size are all culturally appropriate ways to adapt Somali cuisine to be healthier.

▶ Questions to ask your patients about their diets

Many Somalis are frustrated with the US medical system. Somali patients feel like they do not get enough time with the medical staff, and thus cannot explain their needs. In the Somali medical system, patients explain their whole sense of health and their current complaint before the doctor begins his or her work. Open-ended questions are well received by the Somali community, and indicate your willingness to listen and learn from the patient. Showing interest in your patients' background and learning a few simple phrases goes a long way to build trust in the relationship. The following questions are a starting point for motivational interviewing around the topic of healthy eating. Motivational interviewing prompts patients to determine changes to make in their behavior and lifestyle based on their personal lived experience.

- *Which foods make your body feel the best immediately?*
- *Which foods make your body feel the best all day long?*
- *What foods make you feel the strongest?*
- *What foods make your body feel not strong?*
- *Which foods give your body trouble? What kind of trouble?*
- *What does it feel like when you are hungry? Are there other times that you feel the same way when you are not hungry?*
- *Now that you've thought about the fuel you are giving your body, what changes might you make?*

▶ How to start the conversation with a Somali patient

If a person feels healthy but needs to make changes:

"*My goal is to make sure that you have good health for a long time, and to help you stay strong so you are able to contribute to your family and your community. Thanks to God, "Masha'Allah", you feel healthy and strong. There are things that you can do to be even healthier, to maintain your health for a long time, and to set a good example for your children, family, and friends so they can stay healthy, too.*

There are things that you can do that will help your body to stay healthy. The way you take care of your body allows you to have good health so that you can be an active member of your family and your community. I am not looking at your body and judging your appearance, I learned this because of _____ test. Based on what I learned from that test, I would like to have a conversation about ways to improve your health."

If a person feels sick and needs to make changes:

"*I am hearing you when you say that you feel sick. I am so sorry that you aren't well, and I know that if we work together we can find a way for you to return to health, God willing, "insha'Allah".*

Life in the U.S. is different from life in Somalia. Back home fresh and healthy food was more common, and your daily life had more physical activity. You have an opportunity to be healthy here, but it takes more planning in the U.S. than it does in Somalia. To stay healthy here you need to seek out food with good nutrition and make sure that you are finding ways to keep your body moving.

There are many different foods available in the United States—both traditional Somali foods and unfamiliar foods from other cultures. This includes processed foods that may be high in sugar and fat, and foods that are not healthy for you. Just as a car needs specific fuel to drive, your body needs specific fuel to function.

It can be difficult in Minnesota to get enough physical activity in your day. Back home, I know that your daily life included more physical activity and time outside the home. Here, many of us rely on cars or the bus to get around, we do not walk to the store or market every day, and the weather can make us want to stay inside. There are many ways that you can be more active in your life, though. You can take the stairs instead of the elevator, you can walk around the malls, you can participate in exercise classes or go to the gym. You can play with the kids in your family, go for a walk outside with your friends, or even use things in your home to exercise.

Because of your _____ test that showed me _____ about your health, I have suggestions for ways that you could improve your health."