

Burmese (Karen)

Disclaimer:

While information about a specific culture can aid understanding of a patient, it is important to understand that a patient from a particular culture will not necessarily have the same beliefs or traditions associated with that culture. Each patient is unique, and there are many factors that alter a person's cultural identity, including socioeconomic status, education, age, religion, gender, and lifestyle.

– Cultural Competency for Healthcare Providers, Champlain Valley AHEC, 2011

Country of Origin/ Migration: The Karen are one of the ethnic groups within the region known as Burma or Myanmar. There has been a long history of conflict between Burmese governments and the Karen ethnic group, resulting in the destruction of Karen villages by the military. Thousands of Karen refugees have crossed the border to Thailand for safety and live in refugee camps while others survive as internally displaced people in remote pockets along the border. Burmese refugees began resettling in Vermont in 2009.

Language: Although Burmese is the official language and is understood by much of the population, many ethnic groups speak their own dialect. The two main Karen language groups are Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. The common language will generally be Sgaw so it is very important to have interpreters available who speak Sgaw. It is a tonal language where pitch changes meaning. The Karen are addressed by given names. Traditionally, they do not have family names and married couples do not share the same name.

Religion: The majority of Karen are Buddhist, animist, or Christian (, with Buddhism predominating. – in my experience with most of our families in Chittenden country they are Christian – perhaps leave this bit out) *****

Education/Literacy: Because of underfunding and conflict, national schools in Karen areas have been unable to provide a high standard of education. There is no formal access to education in the Thai refugee camps.

Medical Traditions:

In traditional belief, each person possesses 37 souls, or kla. The kla is constantly in danger of being lost or taken by the spirits, and the Karen believe that losing kla puts a person in danger of illness. Certain herbs, plants, and concoctions may also be used as cures by traditional healers. However, the Karen refugee community is accustomed to accessing health care through a clinic setting, as they have lived in the refugee camps where health care is provided by NGOs. There may be confusion between vitamins and other medications, as Karen use the same word for both and only a few people understand the difference.

Special Considerations:

There is a high incidence of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

For a list of medical conditions endemic to Burma please see <http://www.who.int/countries/mmr/en/>.

Modesty and being deferential to seniors are important values. Often saying “no” is a way to be modest.

**** The best source of information about the patient's experiences and culture is the patient him or herself.**

References:

For more information please visit:

Barron, Sandy et al. Culture Profile No. 21, “Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences”, Center for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Center. June 2007.

<http://www.cal.org/co/pdf/RefugeesFromBurma.pdf>

Neiman, Amy et al., “Karen Cultural Profile”, Ethnomed, July 2008.

<http://ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile>

http://www.cal.org/co/email_discussion/Attachments/IRC-Burma_Health_FactSheet.pdf

Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center, "Cultural Competency for Health Care Providers", 2012.
http://www.cvahec.org/documents/FinalDraft6.0_4.18.12.pdf

Mental Health links:

http://www.cvahec.org/documents/FinalDraft6.0_4.18.12.pdf

<http://studentsfirstproject.org/childadolescent-mental-health/at-risk-populations/refugees/burma/> and

<http://studentsfirstproject.org/wp-content/uploads/BURMA-Cultural-Considerations.pdf>

http://www.kayah.myanmar.bz/resource/ebooks/health_study_in_karenni_refugee_camp.pdf