The Orthodox Jewish Community

Pregnancy and Birth

a guide for hospital staff

This information will help answer any questions you may have while caring for our Orthodox Jewish patients. Please offer your patients and visitors the Jewish Resources brochure, available at each nurse’s station and in the Chaplaincy office located behind the Monti Parking lot in building 1, (red brick building), (ext. 4043).

Background

Many religious couples have a Rabbi whom they trust to help decide issues of Jewish law that pertain to their situation. You may observe a range of practices depending on the couple’s background and level of religious observance.

Nearly all Jewish laws are allowed to be broken in order to save a life. A complicated pregnancy, as well as labor and delivery will often fall into this category.

Some religious obligations, such as fasting on specific days, may be suspended or altered for the safety of the mother and baby.

Many Orthodox married women don’t show their natural hair to men outside their immediate family. Instead they will cover it with a wig, scarf, or a hat. Another identifying feature is their preference towards long skirts and sleeves below the elbow. Husbands will usually wear a head covering (yarmulke).

General Concerns

There are several concerns caregivers should be aware of when treating Orthodox Jewish patients:

- Physical contact between staff and a patient or family member of the opposite gender should be kept to medical necessity. Shaking hands during introductions should be avoided. Husbands may appreciate the opportunity to put on their own wristband identification.

- Under the rubric of modesty, some husbands may avoid direct eye contact with female staff. This does not imply that they are inattentive to what you are saying.
Hospital stays that extend over the Sabbath (a.k.a. Shabbat or Shabbos) or major Jewish holidays (i.e. Yom Tov or Chag). See bottom of page 3 for further definition & elaboration.

Prenatal

- Patients will appreciate being offered the “modesty patient gowns.”
- Women will adhere to strict dietary laws known as kosher. Kosher laws involve the food products themselves and the dishes or appliances used to prepare and serve food. It does not involve a Rabbi blessing the food, although it is likely that someone well versed in the laws of kosher will supervise the preparation process.
- Although most milk meets kosher requirements, some patients seek a higher level of supervision known as cholov yisroel. At present, this milk is not offered as part of our kosher menu, but can be obtained from the fridge in the bikur cholim room on 4 Tower (code 4.1.2). For newborns, special formula is available from the nurses’ station to meet this need.

Some common customs practiced by expectant parents:
- Not informing anyone of the pregnancy until 3 months after conception.
- Not preparing the home more than is necessary for the coming baby.

Delivery

Inducing labor without medical need is not accepted by Jewish law. The use of pitocin, planned unnecessary C-sections and digital dilation without medical need should not be expected or performed.

At a certain point, the Jewish laws of Niddah (meaning ‘removed’ or ‘separate’) become relevant. These laws govern behavior between spouses at a time usually associated with the wife’s menstruation. Generally speaking, it begins when the mom’s labor is so intense she is no longer able to stand. It can also be determined by the degree of dilation. The restrictions include:

- No physical contact between husband and wife
- No passing of items from one parent to the other until the wife stops bleeding (often several weeks)

It is important to be aware of this because while both parents may be elated at the birth, couples that adhere rigorously to these restrictions are not permitted to kiss or hug. They may even ask you (or another third party) to pass the baby between them. This should not be misunderstood as a lack of happiness or love.
Husbands may choose to offer support while standing at the head of the bed, thus avoiding looking directly at the vaginal area out of respect and concern for the modesty of their wife. The placement of a mirror in which to view the delivery is likely to be considered inappropriate and immodest. In a few instances, husbands may elect to remain outside the room.

In the event of a demise after the embryonic stage, Jewish tradition advocates for burial of the fetus. The Chevra Kadisha (sacred burial society) of Queens can be contacted at any time to advise and/or assist with arrangements: 718-849-9700.

**Postpartum and the Newborn**

Some couples have a large family that may want to visit to wish ‘mazel tov’ (congratulations) to the new family. Assuming this is welcomed by the mother and her roommate, it should be facilitated if at all possible.

It is common practice not to disclose the baby’s name or complete the birth certificate until the official naming ceremony.

- For a girl, this will be announced in the synagogue in conjunction with a prayer for the wellbeing of mother and child.
- For a boy, this will generally be at his ‘bris’ (circumcision) on the 8th day.

Patients that are ready for discharge on a Friday or the eve of a Holiday will appreciate being discharged as early as possible so that they arrive home in time before the start of Shabbat/Holiday.

**Sabbath / Holiday eve concerns:**

Holidays are defined as the 2 days of Rosh Hashana and Shavuot, Yom Kippur (often viewed as the Holiest day of the year), and the first and last 2 days of Sukkot and Passover (i.e. Pesach). Like Sabbath, these days begin at dusk (when it begins to get dark) and conclude with sunset (fully dark) the following night.

Hospitalization over Sabbath or a major Jewish Holiday presents unique challenges for the observant Jew. These Holy Days and their accompanying laws (mentioned in or derived from the Bible) are designed to bring about rest from creative acts in order to assert and reaffirm God’s role as ultimate Creator.
Some restrictions are:

- triggering electrical devices including breast pumps or doors
- using telecommunications or call bells
- driving
- engaging in monetary transactions
- writing (even signing their name)

Jewish law advocates that those that are sick, in labor, or have just given birth may perform these actions if necessary for their health. However, many of our patients are used to observing the Sabbath in a certain way. The thought or suggestion of breaking from their routine may cause anxiety.

Therefore, here are a few things to consider:

- Check with the patient before leaving a light on or off in their room.
- Offer a manual (non-electronic) call bell if they are anxious about how to call a staff member.
- A relative that wishes to stay with the patient over Sabbath/Holiday because they do not drive on the Sabbath will appreciate the opportunity to sleep in the patient’s room.

Orthodox visitors will knock to enter the unit on Sabbath/Holiday instead of using the electronic buzzer or entry phone. They will not identify themselves through an electronic intercom system.

- Please inform visitors about the Bikkur Cholim lounge on 4 Tower. This room is stocked by the community with basic kosher food supplies that will tide them over till after the Sabbath. It is also a quiet place to pray. (At other times they can avail themselves of the kosher sandwiches or salads in the cafeteria or the kosher vending machine nearby.)

  **Note:** this room is **not** intended for sleeping overnight. Should overnight accommodation on-site be required, please contact Guest Services x4837.

- Some patients or visitors uncomfortable with asking others to do a ‘prohibited’ Sabbath activity may **hint** to you to perform the action rather than ask outright.

Some examples:

1. “My bed is a bit low” - they may want their bed raised.
2. “It’s hot in here” - they may be asking you to adjust the room temperature
3. “I’m not sure what to do, the grape juice and challah rolls never arrived with my meal” – they may be asking you to call dietary to request the missing menu items
4. “Is the food always this cold?” – they may be asking you to reheat their food. **Note:** Please be sure the food remains packaged in the same way as the patient hands it to you for reheating. Most orthodox patients will not eat the food if it looks like the packaging was removed or tampered with on the way to them.

5. A visitor may ask “how do I leave the floor?” – They may be hoping you will walk ahead of them and press the elevator button to trigger an electronic door to open.

Please discuss discharge plans with your patient if their anticipated discharge falls during a Holiday. Some patients (often after consultation with their Rabbi) may opt to pre-pay with a local cab company. You may invite them to leave the number with you or in their chart so that the cab can be called for them at discharge.

If they didn’t have an opportunity to pre-pay, there are taxi-vouchers available at the discretion of the nurse managers to facilitate discharge on the Holiday.

If patients will not leave campus during the Holiday, see above note regarding possibility of coordinating accommodation on campus through the chaplaincy department.

Please offer your orthodox patients an open box of tissues as an alternative to tearing toilet roll. (Acts of tearing/destruction are forbidden on the Sabbath/Holiday)

Some Rabbinic authorities interpret “squeezing” items as prohibited on Sabbath. Patients that follow this position may seek alternative methods of wiping their baby to avoid “squeezing” moisture out of baby wipes.

Electric Sabbath candles are available at each nurse station for patients to welcome in the Sabbath before sundown Friday or Holidays.

Extra challah (bread) rolls and grape juice are available by calling food services at Ext. 4110. (On the Sabbath itself, please offer to call on behalf of the patient.)

There is a refrigerator in post-partum’s kitchen area or the bikkur cholim room (4 Tower) to store food that patients/visitors bring from home.

High-risk patients that are here for extended periods will appreciate being offered (or may ask for) a small fridge to store kosher food in their room. These are available from engineering ext. 4235.
Before each Holiday, dietary accepts requests for pre-paid guest trays. Visitors expecting to be here over a Holiday will be grateful for the opportunity to receive a full hot meal by pre-paying (usually $15/tray) at the cashier’s office near the Monti lobby. If they were unable to pay prior to the onset of the Holiday, guest trays can still be requested on their behalf and they should be instructed to pay at the conclusion of the Holiday in the cafeteria or in the cashier’s office.

Please call the Department of Chaplaincy Care and Education for any additional questions or suggestions at Ext. 4011.

Here is a sample reading list of contemporary anthologies and compendiums that detail/explain the laws and traditions referenced above:

1) **Shabbat laws**

2) **Modesty**
   Halichos Bas Yisroel. Rabbi YY Fuchs 1985 (Targum Press, Michigan)

3) **Niddah**
   Halachos of Niddah, Rabbi Shimon B. Eider 1981 (Feldheim Publishers Jerusalem/New York)

4) Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics, Rabbi Avraham Steinberg, 2003 (Feldheim Publishers Jerusalem/New York)

**Photo References:**


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