

Ask a Muslim - Q&A

Dear Classmates,

We are honored to have been able to answer your questions to the Ask A Muslim initiative and we hope that you find the answers informative, enlightening, and hopefully helpful at building bridges so that we can learn from each other and from the diversity that each one of us brings to our respective communities.

Islam is one of the most commonly practiced religions in the world, and you will find innumerable differences in how each one of the 1.7 billion Muslims interpret, practice, and cherish their faith. If our answers seem overtly broad, that is because even amongst our small community here at Michigan, opinions and interpretations vary greatly. We want to emphasize that we at MMSA cannot speak for all Muslims and so we hope that these answers are a beginning to an engaging conversation on how to better understand cultures, religions, and practices other than our own and how to best treat one another with kindness, respect, and love.

In the practice and study of medicine, we strive in the pursuit of empathy, tolerance, and developing a trusting, positive relationship with our patients for the betterment of their health – mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. For many of us, those principles, along with the pursuit of excellence, are what compelled us to medicine. As future physicians, we are selected and trained to embrace everyone who seeks our care, whether it is in an office, in an emergency room, in a mid-flight airplane emergency, or even in our interactions with one another. While there is great diversity in our country, there is also insulation from beliefs and practices different than our own. As future physicians -- especially given our country's current political climate -- we hope that the responsibility we have to our fellow men and women and their health prevails over any divisions based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ability, or religion.

Recent political actions have marginalized and struck fear into the hearts of many American Muslims and their loved ones. We rely deeply on our communities for support, solidarity, and friendship. We all have biases, and we hope that part of this project will help us to further learn from each other and challenge the troubling, yet complex narratives in the hearts and minds of those around us. We hope to create a more welcoming environment at Michigan Medicine where questions and conversations are encouraged. We do not reject those with opinions that go against our own; however, we are rightfully cautious when prejudice, against a person or a group of people, becomes apparent as it unfortunately has in a few questions that we received as a part of this project.

Bigotry and intolerance have no place in our lives or our future careers as physicians. We must value the personhood and best interests of our patients and communities who honor us with their trust in their most vulnerable times of need. Because of this, we ask you to keep your heart, mind, and perhaps now most importantly, your eyes and ears open to discrimination and antagonism hiding in our small communities. We promise to stay vigilant and stand up in support of our peers and patients, and we ask that you do the same.

We wish to thank each and every person who posed us a question, and now, to thank you, the reader, for spending time with us through our responses.

With love,
MMSA

Disclaimer: Please remember that we are writing these responses as your friends, peers, and future colleagues. We hope that by answering these questions, we have helped you to better understand Muslims that you will undoubtedly encounter throughout the rest of your career. Islam is a huge religion (practiced by ~1.7 billion people) and Muslims are extremely diverse in their views and practices. Therefore, our views expressed here could not possibly be representative of all Muslims, and we hope that you will continue to read and listen to other first-hand Muslim sources.

I. Medical

1. What are some things I should know when treating Muslim patients? What about when working with Muslim colleagues? How can I make sure to be respectful and supportive of your beliefs?

- a. Because Muslims are vastly diverse in their customs, culture, and belief system, it would be hard to make assumptions on how to interact with any particular Muslim colleague. In general, there is no need to interact any differently at all. But, just having a working knowledge of things that some Muslims may abide by can be helpful in addressing any setting. For example, many Muslims have dietary restrictions, which can include no pork or alcohol. Many also only eat meat if it is killed through a humane process that deems it Halal (similar to food being Kosher). That doesn't mean they require any special accommodation--it's just an FYI in case it comes up in the patient interview.

Some Muslims also choose not to shake hands with the opposite gender, in which case they'll probably just put their hand over their chest as a way of politely declining if prompted for a handshake. If you meet someone who doesn't shake hands, they're not trying to offend you, and they're definitely not offended that you reached out for a handshake.

In general, some Muslims fast during a month called Ramadan, where they wake up before dawn to have breakfast and don't eat, drink, smoke or engage in sexual intercourse until dusk. It can be something to talk about with your patient if, for example, they need to take medication on a full stomach multiple times per day, or have a surgery that will require ample nutrition during Ramadan. If medically contraindicated, they can postpone fasting until they are healthy again.

Due to similar content, questions 2-3 were answered together.

2. As a physician, what is the best way to approach the physical exam with a female muslim patient?
 3. Is there anything we should know for physical exams specifically regarding Muslims? (e.g. can women only be examined by women? do we conduct exams with the hijab on or ask the patient to remove it?)

- a. Everyone is different, and the best policy is just to ask. Many times, a patient will choose the doctor who is best able to care for him/her, regardless of the sex. Their health is their first priority, and any part of the physical exam falls under that umbrella. If they prefer to have someone of the same sex, they'll ask, and perhaps if they seem uncomfortable with you performing the exam, you could ask them. You could additionally also ask if they want a chaperone in the room if they seem uncomfortable. If the part of the exam involves any area under the hijab (head scarf) or any other article of clothing, just let the patient know what the exam will entail and ask if he/she is okay with it. The same draping techniques we've learned translate perfectly.

4. What is the best way for a male physician to approach the HEENT physical exam on a woman who is wearing a head covering?

- a. This can be done the same way any physical exam would be: brief the patient on what the exam entails, make sure it's okay, uncover the parts that need to be uncovered for only the time they need to be uncovered. Don't do more than is necessary. You can also have the patient undo her scarf, they can be tied pretty intricately at times.

5. What things in medical care do you think we should all know? What about outside of medical care? What are ignorant mistakes people make that really bother you? What do you wish people, both classmates and otherwise, understood better about Islam and what it takes to be Muslim? What kinds of things should non-muslims do in support? Where should I go if I want to learn more and have a better understanding? Thank you for doing this!!

- a. This question loops in many of the things covered in the above questions. One of the most meaningful things is often when people feel comfortable to ask about parts of Islam they don't understand. If you're ever unsure of how to approach anything regarding a Muslim (patient or not), just ask. Many of us are more than happy to answer your questions. If we don't have the answers, we will connect you to somebody who does.

II. Cultural/Social

6. What is the one thing that I should know about Islam that will most help me be sensitive of the religion and culture?
 - a. That this is a religion with ~1.7 billion followers (nearly 1 in every 4 people around the globe). Muslims span every continent, and come from a variety of different cultures and backgrounds. If you keep in mind the diversity of the followers, you'll be better able to keep in mind the diversity of how people practice the faith, and approach Muslims with an open-mind. And whenever you have a question, don't be afraid to ask.

7. I'm familiar with dietary restrictions regarding pork, pork products, and alcohol consumption. Are there other dietary or beverage restrictions that are common amongst Muslim brothers and sisters? Additionally, is halal preparation considered a command or suggestion?
 - a. Dietary restrictions vary from person to person. Many Muslims refrain from consuming pork and alcohol. Others also refrain from consuming meat that is not "Halal", very similar to the concept of "Kosher" in the Jewish religion. Other subsets of Muslims may also refrain from smoking and consuming illegal substances. Others may not have any dietary restrictions at all. Muslims are a *huge* and extremely diverse group of people, so specific practices vary from person to person depending on their practice and cultural background. As always, it doesn't hurt to ask what an individual chooses to consume or not.

8. What food restrictions are included in Halal?
 - a. Halal defines a certain manner in which an animal is slaughtered. One of the goals is to insure that the animal does not suffer and that the meat is healthy for consumption. Some of the conditions that need to be met in order to certify the meat as "halal" are: the animal must be slaughtered by one stroke using a sharp knife that goes through the trachea, esophagus, and the 2 jugular veins; the animal should be then completely drained from blood; the animal should not be diseased or contaminated; and no other animal should be present when the slaughtering is happening. Also, certain animals are not considered halal regardless of the method of slaughter, these include: swine and any of its products, animals that eat other animals, and animals that have toxins. Fish are generally considered to be halal independent of how the fish are killed.

9. What is the proper way for non-muslim males to greet and interact with muslim females? Hand shaking, hugs, etc.
 - a. Given the diversity of Muslims, there is no definitive answer for this question. It is always best to ask what the other person's preferences are if you want to make sure that you are not, unintentionally, taking a less preferable approach of interaction - whether it be too much or too little. While some women choose to not have any physical contact with Muslim or non-Muslim men (including shaking hands and giving hugs), others have no personal restrictions and are comfortable with these forms of interaction. As mentioned in question #1, if you do know that the Muslim female you are interacting with prefers not to shake hands with men, you can put your hand over your chest while greeting her rather than extending it for a handshake.

Due to similar content, questions 10-11 were answered together.

10. Are there part of the medical school/health system that don't feel inclusive toward Muslim students and professionals? What are some ways to make our environment more welcoming?
11. Are you feeling comfortable and welcomed and accepted here as a Muslim in Michigan and here at our school? (I hope that you are!)
 - a. The vast majority of our peers and faculty are absolutely wonderful and supportive people. Generally the school and health system has been very accommodating and welcoming of our diversity. As with any minority group, there have been occasions where discriminatory speech or biases came out, but these episodes are the exception rather than the rule.

12. Hi! This isn't exactly a religion-specific question. As a non-Muslim, what can I do/what can the rest of the non-Muslim community do to make the medical school more welcoming or safe for Muslim students--especially given the divisive environment engendered by the actions of the new president?
 - a. Thank you! Your question is heartwarming! A smile can go a long way to anyone who is feeling disenfranchised. If you ever witness bias or discrimination, stand up, not just for Muslims, but for any person treated unjustly. And whatever happens in the next months/years, never let hate and discrimination become normalized.

13. Why are Muslims so awesome?!?! With love, your Jewish sister :)
- Because we have awesome friends like you! :)
 - This warms our hearts! We're all brothers and sisters regardless of our different backgrounds. Thank you Jewish sister! :)
14. Why are all of the Muslims I meet so dang NICE?
- "You're nice!"
"No you're nice!"
"But you're nicer!"
"No, you're nicer!"
 - You're so dang nice!
 - Oh staaaaahp.

III. Religious

15. In your view, what does Islam have in common with other faith traditions, and what are differences? (Obviously this is a huge question, but I'm curious to know if there is common ground to be found amongst Muslim, Jewish, Christian (etc) healthcare providers.)
- We all have faith in one God, who created the universe. Many Muslims see Islam as a continuation of God's one religion, begun with the prophethood of Adam and continuing with many prophets, including Noah, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jesus, and finally Muhammad (peace be upon them all). We all believe in the Golden rule.
16. Can you give a summary of your key beliefs and values?
- We recommend that you watch this 13 minutes [video](#). It does a great job explaining the history of Islam.
17. I'm sure it's a complicated topic, but how do Muslims generally view the afterlife? Is it a heaven vs. hell mentality, multiple levels of heaven, search for Nirvana, or other afterlife journey/experience? Thanks!
- This answer will vary from individual to individual and between different schools of thought. Some believe that heaven and hell are physical places while others think about them as a subjective state of consciousness that one will experience after death. This depends on how a Muslim chooses to interpret the Quran.
18. Why is it ok according to the Quran for a man to take multiple women, to keep a harem, but not for a woman to marry several men?
- Though polygamy was practiced historically during the time period Islam arose, and is cited in the Quran, it is not practiced today by the vast majority of Muslims around the world.
19. Why do you accept the Islamic laws that subjugate women to men?
- Mistreatment of women around the world is attributed to cultural practices and not to a particular religion. We support the global struggle for women's rights. With that said, we encourage you to read about topics such as feminism in Islam and early women's rights in Islam to learn more about the topic.
20. Why do you require women to cover their bodies but do not demand the same modesty of men?
- There is not a consensus in the Muslim world on issues of modesty and how an individual Muslim woman dresses is influenced by her personal values, interpretation of doctrine, and culture. The general recommendation however is for both Muslim men and women to dress modestly.

IV. Political

21. Is there at all a general feeling among most Muslims regarding the ban on non-Muslims from visiting Mecca?
- This is a policy of the government of Saudi Arabia and many Muslims do not agree with this policy. Most Muslims do not conflate the policies of a particular state government with the teachings of the religion.

22. What assumptions do you see the media commonly making about the Islamic faith that drive you crazy/are inaccurate?
- I can't stand the way in which the media portrays muslim women.
 - That we all like Hummus. I don't like Hummus!
 - That all Muslims are Arabs and vice versa.
 - That wearing the Hijab is a form of oppression and is imposed on a woman rather than it being a personal choice.
 - That we are all the same regarding culture, language, and religious practice.
 - That Muslim women are oppressed and cannot be strong, independent leaders.
23. What are some different perspectives that Muslim people have regarding ISIS and the terrorism that the group enacts? Is the group's mission acceptable, unacceptable, or just somewhat misguided according to how most Muslim people feel (or are opinions mixed)? What do you wish you could tell America regarding the intersection of Islam faith and ISIS?
- We unequivocally condemn any act of violence that targets innocent people--as that has no place in Islam, or humanism for that matter. However, some groups, e.g. ISIS, are able to skew the teachings of Islam for their own benefit or to further their political ambitions. There is no reasonable religious basis for their behavior. We chose to pursue the medical profession precisely because we believe in helping those in need, a sentiment that Muslims around the world carry with them.
24. What place does Sharia law play in a Muslim's life who lives in the US?
- This answer will vary greatly from individual to individual and from school of thought to school of thought. To some Muslims, Sharia law may be a set of practices or rituals that one subscribes to as a practical guide on how to worship e.g. praying five times per day, fasting for 30 days during Ramadan, sponsoring orphans, performing Hajj/pilgrimage, etc. To others, it could be a set of overarching principles from the Quran such as kindness to others, treating the poor with respect, being kind to our parents, etc. Muslims vary greatly on how they choose to interpret the Quran and other religious texts and generally it would be difficult to identify a set of laws that all Muslims in the US would subscribe to. For the overwhelming majority of US Muslims, their religious convictions are not in conflict with traditional American values, which is why they have come to call America "home."
25. What are the problems with Sharia law?
- Broadly, sharia law is just the interpretations of the Quran that manifest into principles that guide Muslims in their daily lives. Problems arise when certain groups attempt to impose their interpretations to all others around them, regardless of their faith or beliefs.

V. Miscellaneous

26. The Quran says you must earn your way to Paradise. Do you acknowledge that your motives are not entirely selfless if you are performing good acts in the pursuit of your own reward in Paradise? Your motives are not purely selfless.
- Even when people act selflessly, there's often some component of self-gratification--it's just human nature (for example: the sense of joy you get when you help someone in need or the rewarding feeling you get when your donation makes a difference). You get *something* out of all of those actions, even if it's just the way you feel or the way others see you. It is impossible to know someone else's deepest intentions, and so it is impossible to know what is "purely selfless". This is besides the fact; only God can and should judge the intentions of other people. Muslims believe each person is responsible for what they did and why they did it, and a good deed done for an evil reason is ultimately a sin because of what was intended. A good deed done with a partially good intention is only partially rewarded. As Muslims, we are encouraged to continually check our intentions and to try to do better. Thus, doing things out of a desire for reward is a very low state compared to one who does things purely out of a love for God. One such motivation to do good is that we feel overwhelming love from God. We've been blessed with so much more than we deserve - food, family, friends, a safe country, opportunity, education, an opportunity to heal the sick - that it becomes natural for us to want to help others.

Due to similar content, questions 27-29 were answered together.

27. The Quran says non-Muslims can be overcome using physical force if necessary to convert them to Islam. The Quran endorses killing non-Muslims to achieve the goal of spreading Islam. How can you ascribe to a religion that commands you to use force, killing if necessary, to convert others? Please do not say that other religions do the same such as Christianity because the bible does NOT tell Christians to kill others in order to convert them. Some people may call themselves Christian and use violence, but they are not following what the bible actually says - they are misusing the label for their own purpose that is not God's command. The bible does not endorse killing others to convert them. However, the Quran very specifically does endorse this.
28. Do you acknowledge that Islam commands Muslims to convert others using violence if necessary? Please don't provide your personal opinion, but rather, stick to what the Quran concretely says.
29. Do you acknowledge that the Quran endorses using physical force, including killing if necessary, anyone who does not submit to Allah?
 - a. The Quran states "There is no compulsion in religion" [Quran 2:256]. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right in Islam and the Quran is a book that preaches love and respect of all humanity, regardless of religion. We love and respect the diverse communities amongst which we live and wish them nothing less than we wish for ourselves and our families--that's a main principle for which Islam stands. It is incumbent upon all of us to work together to make this world a peaceful and safe place to live for all of us. We encourage you to read the following [article](#) on "Does the Quran Really Sanction Violence Against 'Unbelievers'?"

Due to similar content, questions 30-31 were answered together.

30. As an American, do you put freedom of religion before Islam's command that you persecute non-Muslims? Do you accept that if you want to live in this country, you must respect freedom of religion without encouraging a religion that commands you to kill those who do not share your beliefs?
31. The US was founded on allowing freedom of religion. Islam supports intolerance of non-Muslims and killing them if needed to make them convert. Do you think that in promoting your religion that directly antagonizes the values of other religions in that Islam says you will go to Paradise if you kill a heathen, that you are going against the American values of freedom? How can Islam, a religion hostile towards tolerance of other religions, play a role in the values that this country was founded on? We are tolerant of others, but Islam is not tolerant of non-Muslims. Doesn't that seem a problem?
 - a. Our religion does not command us to persecute anyone. We cherish diversity, and wish nothing less for people who are different than ourselves, regardless of their religion, culture, gender, sexual orientation, etc. We believe it is incumbent upon all of us to work together for a brighter future for all. Please see the answer to the previous set of questions for further information.