

Haitian Health Care Beliefs and Voodoo (Voudou)

Concept of Health

Haitians have a very strong belief in God's power and His ability to heal, they believe that whatever happens is God's will. They believe God works through various media; including dreams, home or natural treatments and traditional medical means. Most believe that physical health is maintained by proper diet, cleanliness, exercise and adequate rest. Praying is an essential aspect of good health.

Health is considered a personal responsibility and Haitian will first self-treat to promote health or treat disease before seeking traditional medical care. Home remedies are often used first and include herbal preparations, poultices, massage, baths or over the counter medications. Haitians typically seek medical care only when it becomes clear that an illness is not responding and need more attention. Clinicians should ask about what home remedies and herbal treatments the patient has tried. Often Haitians may take herbal and prescribed medicines at the same time.

Haitians often use vague terms to describe their symptoms and may not provide an accurate time frame for their illness. Patients may tell clinician what illness he/she thinks they have, rather than describe symptoms. It is often helpful to ask, "What do you think you have?" Patients often diagnose their illness and treat his/her symptoms based on another Haitian's experience with similar symptoms. Sometimes they use medical terms inappropriately to describe their symptoms.

Compliance with treatment depends on the perceived severity of the illness. Some illnesses are perceived to be severe because someone they know has died from the disease. The higher the illness is considered severe; the greater the degree of compliance. Many stop treatment as soon as symptoms improve.

Voodoo (Voudou)

Voodoo is a folk religion that is widespread in Haiti and is practiced by the majority of Haitians, including those who classify as Christians. Voodoo is not used by its practitioners to do harm; it is not only a religion, but also a health care system that includes disease prevention, health and well-being promotion. Health is perceived as being in harmony with the spirits, the environment and with others. Voodoo gods were, and continue to be, perceived as powerful and protective. People who practice voodoo believe that everything, good or bad, happens at the whim of spirits. Illnesses are thought to have either natural or supernatural causes; for example, if the spirits are angry with you they can make you sick. Treatment practices and rituals are designed to appease the spirits and restore harmony. Remedies used in Voodoo generally originate from plants, Voodoo priests often have a widespread knowledge of herbal remedies. A number of Haitians seek help from Voodoo practitioners because they charge less than doctors do.

Attitudes and beliefs about physical illness, health care and treatment

1. Spirituality and Disease

- Haitians believe the Gods of Voodoo, called "Loas" are responsible for many aspects of health, especially mental health. This belief may contribute to passivity about health decisions.
- Anger, fear, worry and sadness are believed to contribute to physical and mental illness.
- Many perceive illness as a punishment, an attack on the body that may have natural or supernatural etiologies. Possession by evil spirits are a common explanation for illness.
- It is believed that bad news or a frightful situation can disrupt normal blood flow and make blood move to the head, causing partial loss of vision, headache, increased blood pressure or stroke.
- Supernatural illness, caused by the anger of spirits is very serious. Consultation with a Voodoo priest is necessary to find out what the spirit advises for a cure.

- Natural illness, known as “disease of the Lord” (Maladi Bondye), is usually a visible or physical illness of short duration. It occurs often and can be healed by traditional (Western) medicine.
- Haitians believe that exposing the body to an imbalance of “hot” (cho) and “cold” (fret) cause illness. For example, after any activity that makes the body hot, they should not eat cold food because that will cause an imbalance.

2. Reproduction and Sexuality

- Haitians do not seek prenatal care as pregnancy is not perceived as an illness. Pregnant women are encouraged to eat large portions and favor “red” foods believing it increases the baby’s blood. Spicy foods are avoided to prevent upsetting the baby.
- Mothers often do not remain in bed long after childbirth, which many times occurs at home without skilled birth attendants. This increases the risk to mother and new-born and contributes to the high maternal infant mortality in Haiti.
- “Perdition” is used by many patients to explain a pregnancy for up to 6 years; they believe that the devil can hold the baby inside of them.
- Many Haitians believe birth control is inappropriate; they consider children to be a blessing from God. Men often do not recognize their responsibility in preventing conception. Many men believe that condoms reduce sexual pleasure.
- Abortion is considered taboo (because children are a blessing). An herbal tea called “boule ti mas” used in the 1st trimester can induce an abortion.
- Haitians do not acknowledge or discuss homosexual relationships.
- Haitians are very sensitive to discussion about sexually transmitted infection (STI). In part because in 1982, Haiti was the first developing country blamed for the origin of AIDS.
- Teenage boys are often encouraged to be sexually active to gain experience while teenage girls are expected to wait until marriage.

3. Mental illness

- The paradox of mental illness is that discussion of it is off-limits - Haitians will not admit to having a mental illness - but mentally ill people are perceived as in need of protection. The shame of mental illness is not related to the illness but the inability to function that accompanies it.
- Haitians typically believe that mental illness has supernatural causes, such being possessed by evil spirits or as a punishment for not honoring good spirits. It can also be caused by someone putting a hex or curse on a person.
- Victims of hexes or curses have to seek help from Voodoo priests to intervene with the Gods on their behalf. They may only seek medical help after many unsuccessful attempts by the Voodoo priest to help. Often they use mental health and Voodoo treatments at the same time.
- Some Haitians will only accept treatment and hospitalization in cases of severe mental problems.
- Haitians describe depression as “discouragement” and think it is caused by a curse or due to excessive worry, “shock” or trauma. A depressed patient typically presents with non-specific complaints - generalized pain, insomnia, “an empty head”, low energy and poor appetite.
- The ritual practices performed by Voodoo priests are often similar to psychotherapy - singing, dancing, the use of massage and touch often helps patients to relax and relive stress.

4. Physical Deformities

- It is believed that an angry spirit, perhaps enlisted by someone who wishes a person harm, causes physical deformity. People with genetic defects may be viewed as a curse on the family.
- Typically few people with disabilities receive care and most are kept at home and sometimes hidden.

5. Pain (doule)

- Most Haitians believe that disease affects the whole body so the location of pain is not important.
- Many Haitian have a low pain threshold and may moan loudly to express the degree of pain
- Most prefer injections to relieve pain, although alternative methods are accepted.

6. Fatigue

- Haitians think fatigue is a sign of physical weakness known as "febles", caused by insufficient blood and poor diet.
- Most believe certain foods, vitamins and rest will cure the illness.
- Complaints of fatigue or weakness are also often used instead of reporting depression.

7. GI Complaints

- Diarrhea is believed to be very dangerous in children. Some parents think it is a punishment or curse visited upon the child. They will seek help from a Voodoo priest and herbal cures first and only seek help from a physician if the diarrhea persist. It is very important for clinicians to assess the child carefully because he/she may have been ill for some time.
- Prior to treating diarrhea, the clinician needs to carefully question the parent about the nature of the "diarrhea" – often any isolated case of a soft or runny stool is described as diarrhea. This is common among new breastfeeding mothers who perceive the typically soft stool of a breast fed baby as diarrhea.
- Constipation is not a common complaint in Haitians, it is typically treated with herbal teas. If not improved with herbal remedies they may see help and will try laxatives and sometimes enemas.
- Intestinal infections are common, especially among children, and usually present in the form of dysenteries or enteritis. Due to the habit of eating "dirt cookies", intestinal infestation through the swallowing of eggs or larvae of the worms from the ground is common.
- Many prefer fasting to eating non-Haitian food as they are afraid such food may make them sicker.
- It is not uncommon to see patients with teeth of dead people, animals or a door key in a necklace around their neck to stop vomiting or a string tied in a knot around their toes to stop diarrhea.

8. Respiratory Illness

- Many Haitians use the term "oppression" to describe a state of anxiety and hyperventilation. A common complaint is "I am suffocating" or "I cannot breathe". Offer oxygen only when absolutely necessary, as many Haitians associate it with life threatening illness.

Consideration in Patient Management

North American clinicians need to consider Voodoo beliefs and practices when treating Haitian patients. Provide medical education on the reason for an illness and refer patient to spiritual leaders (for patients that are Christians).

Be aware that Haitians who routinely visit Voodoo healers may expect the North American clinician to diagnose their illness without asking for information. Likewise some Haitians will give great detail about surrounding environment, weather, time of day, who they were with and clothing they were wearing, as these are important information when diagnosing supernatural illnesses.