Guide for professionals: cultural humility in kidney nutrition education

Providing effective kidney nutrition education involves understanding the cultural context of each patient's life, values and food practices.

Cultural competence refers to the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across diverse cultures.

Cultural humility, on the other hand, is an ongoing, lifelong practice of self-reflection and learning to understand and respect others' cultural preferences. It emphasizes recognizing personal and systemic biases and working collaboratively with patients to honor their cultural perspectives.

Addressing food preferences, accessibility, cultural and dietary traditions helps to:

- Improve dietary adherence and kidney health outcomes
- Build trust and engagements with patients
- Reduce health disparities and promote equitable care
- Support family and community involvement
- Promote sustainable dietary changes

Questions to ask patients

When conducting assessments, ask questions that invite conversation and show respect for the patient's background, culture and lived experience. Here are some questions to ask patients:

Cultural background and food traditions:

- What foods are important in your culture?
- What traditional dishes do you eat regularly?
- Are there specific cooking methods you prefer or commonly use?

Religious dietary practices:

- Do you have any dietary restrictions (e.g., Halal, Kosher, vegetarian, fasting)?
- Are there any foods you avoid for religious reasons?
- Are there any foods you consume regularly for religious reasons?

Food preferences and eating habits:

- What are your typical meal and snack times?
- What does a typical day of eating look like for you?
- What are your favorite meals and snacks?
- How often do you eat at home vs. eating out?
- What types of food do you typically choose when eating out?
- What flavors and seasonings do you enjoy?
- Is there anyone in your household who assists with meal preparation or planning?

Questions to ask patients (continued)

Food accessibility and affordability:

- Where do you usually get your groceries? Do you rely on a food pantry or food bank?
- What types of groceries do you typically get? What about fruits and vegetables? Protein sources?
- How has the cost of groceries affected you? Have you had to cut meal sizes or skipped meals entirely?
- Within the past year have you ever been worried your food would run before you had the money to buy more? Has that happened?
- What types of barriers, if any, affect your food choices? (e.g. cost, ability to get to the grocery store)

Practicing cultural humility in nutrition counseling involves engaging patients in their care and working with them to create realistic and culturally appropriate meal plans.

How to practice cultural humility with your patients

- When sharing recipes, include herbs or spices familiar to patients' preferred cuisines.
- Offer kidney-friendly options within traditional dishes rather than replacing them entirely.
- Suggest low-phosphorus alternatives common in patients' eating patterns.
- Identify traditional lean or plant protein sources.
- Incorporate culturally relevant foods and cooking methods in recipes.
- Use culturally relevant language and education materials.
- Involve family, community and household members in meal planning and education.

By taking the time to understand patients' culture, food preferences, habits, traditions and challenges, dietitians can offer meaningful and relevant nutrition guidance. Involving patients in creating meal plans that reflect their culture fosters trust, empowerment, and leads to better kidney health outcomes.

Other resources to learn more:
Diversify Dietetics: Cultural competency resources for dietetics educators
Georgetown University National Center for Cultural Competence

For more professional resources, visit kitchen.kidneyfund.org/pro

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