

# A GUIDE TO CARING FOR JEWISH PATIENTS

This guide will identify the most important areas of Jewish practice where hospital staff can best provide support and understanding.



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# INTRODUCTION

**According to the 2021 census, the Jewish community of Victoria numbers around 50,000 people, although some demographers consider the real number of Jewish Victorians to be closer to 60,000. A large proportion of the Victorian Jewish community survived the Holocaust or are the children or descendants of those who did.**

There are two major strands of Judaism in Victoria: Orthodox and Progressive. Most Jewish people in Melbourne associate with an Orthodox synagogue, although the degree to which they practice Orthodox Jewish law can be placed along a broad spectrum. Many Jewish people are not observant, and might express no particular religious requirements or expect to be treated any differently from anyone else.

This guide will focus mainly on those Jews who would like things to be arranged according to their religious requirements, as well as provide background for those sitting elsewhere on the spectrum of Jewish practice. Generally, the easiest way to find out what needs a specific patient has, is simply to ask them with an accommodating tone. Generally, Jews with religious needs will not take offense from you asking how you can make their experience smoother and more respectful. Whatever level of observance a Jewish person practices, all agree that human life has the highest value, and any Jewish law can be over-ridden if it necessary to save someone's life.

# OVERVIEW OF JEWISH PRACTICE

Jewish practice, the observance of Jewish laws, is a large encyclopaedia of historical and traditional explanations. The original Jewish law comes from the *Torah*, the five books of Moses, which features in the Old Testament. For the purpose of patient support, this guide will focus on the kosher dietary laws, prayer, and the keeping of *Shabbat* and festivals as key elements of Jewish practice.

## KOSHER FOOD – THE DIETARY LAWS

As with the spectrum of observance when it comes to Jewish laws not all Jews observe the dietary laws to the full extent; many Jews strictly observe the dietary laws, whilst others will be content with a vegan or vegetarian option. It is not possible to cook kosher food in a regular kitchen in which non-kosher food is prepared. For this reason, hospitals may obtain pre-packed kosher meals from suppliers who have only kosher food on their premises. Patients who have asked for these meals may prefer to have tea or other hot drinks served to them in a single-use cup, as what is kosher extends to the utensils and crockery used to prepare and serve food. For this reason, they would not eat a sandwich or biscuit that has come from the regular kitchen or hospital supply.

### WHAT MAKES FOOD KOSHER OR NON-KOSHER?

Kosher dietary laws primarily concern animal products. Kosher animals are limited to a select few; land animals must have cloven hooves and chew the cud (beef, lamb etc are permissible); birds mustn't be birds of prey (chicken, turkey etc are permissible); and fish must have both fins and scales (salmon, tuna etc are permissible). So, no pig products (they don't chew the cud); no shellfish (no fins or scales); no shark (no scales) and so on. In addition, animals must be slaughtered in a specific humane manner by highly trained practitioners, in such a way that the animal's blood leaves it body quickly, as blood may not be consumed. Finally, milk products must never be mixed with meat products.

## SHABBAT

The *Torah* decrees that every seventh day has a special holy quality. Since Jews count Sunday as the first day of the week, this day, *Shabbat*, is known as Saturday in English. The Jewish calendar is lunar, meaning that it is oriented to the moon, rather than the sun. As a result, days begin when the sun goes down. *Shabbat* begins when the sun goes down on Friday night and concludes approximately 25 hours later on Saturday night.

The essence of *Shabbat* is that it should be a day of rest, where the focus is on prayer, studying the *Torah*, and spending time with family and loved ones. To achieve this tranquil environment, Jews abstain from a range of activities which would qualify as work for themselves or others. This includes such actions as switching on the light, driving, cooking food, using the phone etc. To navigate this in the home, lights will be on timers and food prepared beforehand, with a hot plate on a timer to heat up food.

In choosing examples of the types of actions Jews who observe these will not do, we have focussed on those most likely to be relevant in a hospital setting:

- ▶ Turn electric lights on or off
- ▶ Watch television or listen to the radio
- ▶ Operate any electrical device, such as a lift or adjustable bed
- ▶ Answer or speak on a telephone or mobile phone
- ▶ Travel in a motor vehicle (for example, after discharge)

Whilst Jews will not perform these actions for themselves or ask anyone else to do such things for them, they may be grateful if a non-Jewish staff member offers to do so. But the interaction can become a little comical. If a non-Jew asked an observant Jew if they would like the light to be turned off, the reply might be “If you like,” to ensure that there is no suggestion that the Jewish patient is asking for this. If no-one offered to turn off the light, the patient might say “It’s so bright with that light on,” hoping their intention would be understood. It might seem like a weird game, but Jewish law goes to this level of detail to enable an individual to maintain the mindfulness of *Shabbat*.

It is important to state as well that there is no power dynamic present in this exchange. A Jewish patient does not feel any power over you by getting you to turn off a light. If anything, they will simply be grateful you exercised your power to assist their experience.

At the beginning of *Shabbat* on Friday evening, before dark, Jewish women light candles. This is clearly too risky to allow in hospitals, so female patients may have battery-operated substitute candles which they would put next to their bed. Some men may also do this. Patients may wish to say a special blessing over a cup of wine or grape juice. They may wish to wash their hands before the meal by pouring water over them from a cup. If they are unable to get out of bed, they may appreciate assistance with this. Their family may join them to sing prayers quietly together on Friday evening.

## PRAYER

According to Jewish law, Jews are required to pray every day; men at three specific times (morning, afternoon and night) and women at a time of their choosing. Whether Jewish people pray as often as required is determined by their degree of observance.

Individual prayer is predominantly conducted in silence. It can be easy to walk into a room when a Jewish person is praying and not necessarily notice until you speak to them and they have not responded. During prayer, Jewish people may be reluctant to speak and may not answer if spoken to. No offence is meant by this. They may cover or remove symbols of other faiths out of their line of vision while they pray — again, no offence is intended by this action.

If able to stand, they will do so and face north to north-west, towards Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world. In the morning, men may wear a white prayer shawl, called a *tallit*, and on weekdays will strap dark leather bands around their arm and head, called *tefillin*, upon which are attached elements of scripture contained within little black boxes.





# THE JEWISH YEAR

The Jewish year is filled with significant dates, including minor and major festivals, as well as days and periods of mourning. As with **Shabbat**, these important dates begin at sundown. Major festivals are observed similarly to **Shabbat**; observant Jews abstain from certain activities while they pray and celebrate the meaning of the festival with family and loved ones. Again, like **Shabbat**, these festivals are begun with the lighting of candles.

During minor festivals and periods of mourning, there are customs that Jewish people participate in, such as coming together to celebrate or abstain from eating for a period of time, however they are able to use electricity and work as if it were any other day.

Although the Jewish calendar is lunar, it is adjusted with a leap month every few years to ensure that the festivals remain synchronised with the seasons in the northern hemisphere (as many of them are traditionally harvest festivals). For this reason, all Jewish festivals fall within a 3–4 week window. This information can be accessed via the internet or by asking the Jewish Community Council of Victoria. This list only includes the major festivals and the significant minor festivals.

## PASSOVER

**Late March – April (often coincides with Easter)**

Passover, or *Pesach*, is a major festival, which celebrates the emancipation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt some three thousand years ago. It is an eight-day festival and includes a *Seder* on the first two nights, which is a structured evening meal with family and friends, guided by a book, the *Haggadah*, which is filled with stories and songs. Only the first two and last two days of Passover are holy days in which observant Jews do not work.

Passover is marked by its distinct dietary restrictions, which are very complex and need not be explained here beyond the fact that additional restrictions are imposed beyond the regular kosher laws. During Passover, observant Jews will only consume food or drink from family or friends, or a package from a kosher caterer.

## SHAVUOT

**May – June**

*Shavuot* is a major festival which lasts for two days, celebrating the event of G-d giving the *Torah* and Ten Commandments to the Jews at Mount Sinai. It is celebrated seven weeks after Passover. It also known as a harvest festival and the festival of new fruits, and it is customary to eat dairy products, such as cheesecake. Amongst many Jews, it is customary on the first night to stay up all night learning and studying together, to show how grateful we are for receiving the *Torah*.

## ROSH HASHANAH

**September**

*Rosh Hashanah* is the Jewish New Year and is the start of the 10 days of High Holidays which end with *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Both events are major festivals. Traditionally on *Rosh Hashanah*, the *shofar* (ram's horn) is sounded and special foods eaten, such as apple dipped in honey to help bring in a sweet new year, *challah*



dipped in honey on the first night and pomegranates whose seeds signify a year full of good deeds, or *mitzvot*. Although *Rosh Hashanah* is celebratory, it is also considered a day of judgement and a time for self-reflection.

*Rosh Hashanah* is one of the most celebrated festivals, and along with *Yom Kippur* is one which has the greatest attendance at Synagogue. It is also traditional to greet people with new year blessings and good wishes for a good year. The easiest of these phrases is “*Shana tova*”, which means to have a good year. It is a commandment to hear the *shofar* being sounded. Rabbis often travel around Melbourne to schools, offices and hospitals to sound the *shofar* for people who are otherwise unable to hear it.

## YOM KIPPUR

### September – October

*Yom Kippur* is the Jewish Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It is a day of introspection when Jews focus on atoning for their sins and repentance. Traditionally Jews fast from sundown at the beginning of *Yom Kippur*, abstaining from both food and drink, until sundown of the following night. There are prayer services throughout most of the day, and many observant Jews spend much of the day together at synagogue. Blowing of the *shofar* (ram’s horn) signals the end of the *Yom Kippur* day after which an after-fast meal is consumed. The requirement to fast is so severe that some patients may attempt to do so, unless a doctor advises that it would be injurious to their health. Some may seek confirmation of this from their rabbi.

## SUKKOT

### September – October

*Sukkot* is a major festival, which commences five days after *Yom Kippur*. The end of *Sukkot* signifies the end of the high holiday season, which is approximately a month of festivities which begins with *Rosh Hashanah*. Similarly to Passover, the first two days of the festival are holy days during which observant Jews may not work.

*Sukkot* is a festival where Jews build a temporary structure, called the *Sukkah*, covered usually with palm leaves as a reminder of the dwellings the Jews lived in during their 40 years in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. Traditionally, during the seven days of the festival, observant Jews will eat their meals inside the *Sukkah* and some sleep in the *Sukkah* during the festival (weather depending).

Many observant Jews participate in the shaking of the *lulav* and *etrog*, a combination of species which are native to Israel and represent different elements of the human body. Rabbis or religious Jews are likely to visit Jewish patients in hospital to provide them the opportunity to shake the *lulav* and *etrog* during *Sukkot*.

## SIMCHAT TORAH

### October

*Simchat Torah* celebrates the end of the annual cycle of reading of the *Torah*, and the commencement of the new annual cycle. It is celebrated at the end of *Sukkot*. The *Torah* scrolls are carried around the synagogue on the evening and the following morning accompanied by singing and dancing.



## CHANUKAH

**November – December**

*Chanukah* is a minor festival, which lasts for eight days. It commemorates a Jewish victory over the Greeks to recapture the Second Temple in the second century BCE. *Chanukah* is considered the festival of lights, as it is custom to light a candle for each night of the festival on a *Chanukiah*, a nine branched candelabra or *menorah*. For patients who wish to participate in this, electric candles can suffice.

As well as the lighting of candles at home, the lighting of *Chanukah* candles in public and in public areas, such as shopping centres and town halls, has become common practice. This allows the community to celebrate the festival together.

Traditional food eaten during *Chanukah* includes food fried in oil, such as potato *latkes* (pancakes) and *sufganyot* (donuts).

## PURIM

**February – March**

*Purim* is another minor festival, which is celebrated by dressing up, giving friends parcels of food and coming together as a community to read the story of Esther, who spoke up to save the Jewish people from annihilation in ancient Persia. Rabbis often travel around Melbourne to schools, offices and hospitals to read the story of Esther to people who are otherwise unable to hear it.

# BEING JEWISH IN A SECULAR WORLD

This final section attempts to explain in a few simple paragraphs the experience of being Jewish in the world. Since around the beginning of the Common Era (Year 1), Jews have mostly lived in all parts of the world, feeling themselves to be exiled from their homeland of Israel. After the fall of the Roman empire, Jewish communities were the only accepted faiths in Christian Europe and Islamic Empire across the Middle East and North Africa. Jews have been “the other” in many different chapters of history, and this has frequently led to discrimination, prejudice, persecution, and attempted genocide.

Trauma about these experiences have been passed down from generation to generation. The Holocaust is the ultimate example of this experience, and is particularly relevant to the Melbourne Jewish community, as it has the second largest per capita Holocaust survivor community in the world.

Although many of these survivors were able to create wonderful and fruitful lives in Australia, their experiences during the Holocaust left permanent scars on them, which they inadvertently pass on to their children and grandchildren.

Victoria is a very safe and respectful society in which Jews feel comfortable to be outwardly Jewish. However, reports show that a significant minority of Victorians harbour antisemitic views, and that this number is increasing.

The spectrum of what is antisemitic behaviour is both broad and specific, from minor comments which contain ignorant prejudices, to outright racist language and behaviour. Unfortunately, due to millennia of experiences, many Jews keep an ear and an eye out for these types of incidents.

The most important point to draw from this information is to always be respectful, and if someone confides in you or you witness antisemitic behaviour, to contact the JCCV or the Community Security Group (CSG).

# **THIS GUIDE WAS CREATED BY A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN BEIT RAFAEL AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF VICTORIA, AS WELL AS THE SUPPORT OF THE SPIRITUAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION.**

The Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) is the roof body of Victoria's Jewish community, leading and advocating on behalf of the community, as well as facilitating connection, coordination and collaboration between organisations.

+61 3 9272 5566  
[community@jccv.org.au](mailto:community@jccv.org.au)

Beit Rafael is a benevolent institution that provides support to Jewish hospital patients and family members, including crisis hospital accommodation, medical shuttles and other services throughout Melbourne.

0421 408 522  
[admin@beitrafael.org](mailto:admin@beitrafael.org)

[jccv.org.au](http://jccv.org.au)



[beitrafael.org](http://beitrafael.org)

