

Cambodian Cultural Profile – older people

Please Note: This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to older Cambodian people living in South Eastern Region of Melbourne. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However this profile can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern people accessing your services. Information about relevant services & activities is also included.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution made by the Cambodian people consulted. Information was also gathered from “Home and Personal Care Kit - Cultural and Religious Profiles to Assist in Providing Culturally Sensitive Care and Effective Communication”, 2004 and “Palliative Care for CALD Communities” 2009- both produced by the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), Victoria.

Migration to Australia:

The migration of Cambodians to Australia is a relatively recent occurrence:

- During the 1960s and 1970s small numbers of students arrived under the Colombo Plan.
- A significant number of Cambodians settled during late 1970s and throughout the 1980s under the Humanitarian Program. This was the result of the genocide during the “Khmer Rouge - Pol Pot” regime and the invasion of Vietnamese forces in 1979.
- From the 1980s till recently, smaller numbers arrived mainly under the Family Migration Stream, as many of those who had arrived earlier as refugees, sponsored relatives and spouses to come from Cambodia.
- The 2011 Census recorded 11,352 Cambodia-born people in Victoria, which is 40.1% of Australia’s total.

Demographics of Cambodian residents in the South East Region (ABS 2011):

	City of Greater Dandenong	City of Casey	Cardinia Shire
Total population of LGA	135,605	252,382	74,174
Total number of residents born in Cambodia	5,438	1,311	33
No. of Cambodian born residents 55yrs & over	1,131	215	0
Total number of Khmer speaking residents	6,154	1,823	53
No. of Khmer speaking residents 55yrs & over	818	187	0

- In the City of Greater Dandenong, of those residents born overseas, Cambodian born are ranked as the 4th largest group in the total population, being 47.9 % of Victoria’s Cambodian born population.
- It is believed by community leaders that these figures above understate the number of Cambodians living in this region. Some Cambodians here will have been born in Vietnam and in Thailand in refugee camps and others were born in their first settlement country, and will thus have those countries as their place of birth when in actuality they are Cambodian.

Language/Ancestry:

- Cambodia’s national language is Khmer, which is a complex written language.
- The main language spoken at home by Cambodia-born people in Australia is Khmer. However depending upon their ethnic background and where they lived in or out of Cambodia, they may speak as a main language other languages such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Teochew, Vietnamese and others.
- In Australia a majority of Cambodians have Khmer ancestry, followed by Chinese and then Vietnamese and there are few Cham (Muslim ethnic minority of Cambodia) too.
- Many older people continue to speak Khmer only. Often they have had no formal learning in Cambodia and even more so are not literate in their own language. A total of 40.3% of Victoria’s Cambodian born, assessed themselves as speaking English not well or not at all (2011).
- When using interpreters the ancestry is not usually an issue. However many Cambodians prefer an interpreter of their own gender, especially for sensitive situations.

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Religion

- In Cambodia as in Burma, Laos, Thailand & Sri Lanka the most religion followed is Theravada Buddhism.
- A majority of Cambodians in Australia are also Theravada Buddhist and there is a smaller number that are Christians from a range of denominations and there are a few Chams.
- Meditation, prayer, following the teachings of Buddha and the moral codes of conduct of Buddhism are important facets of a Buddhist life.
- Temples and Buddhist monks still play a major role in people's lives here. Monks set an example for the Cambodian Buddhists to follow through their values, behaviours and beliefs. Monks participate in ceremonies, marriages and funerals. The monk's main role is to say prayers of blessing whereas the Achar (lay spiritual leader) will lead these ceremonies. Monks are seen as healers, the providers of guidance and spiritual support. Buddhist Monks, Nuns and lay spiritual leaders are highly respected in the community.
- Many individuals here go regularly to the Buddhist Temples, especially on significant religious days. Some families have ceremonial events at the temples and may also invite the Buddhist monks to their homes for events too. Friends and relatives are often included in these events. For many Cambodian persons it is common for them to increase their religious devotion as they get older.
- Most Cambodians will have a small Buddhist shrine in their home and some also have the cremated ashes of relatives in urns. If they are unable to go to the temple on the important religious days many will pray at the shrine. They will also make offerings to it like lighting and placing incense, fruit and flowers. Only family members are allowed to touch and clean them. The shrine and its Buddha statues are to be treated with the utmost respect.
- Some Cambodian Buddhists have converted to Christianity whilst in refugee camps while others have done so, in Australia, but in small numbers.

Family Structure

- In Cambodia pride and identity is invested in the family and an extended family of 2 or 3 generations can live together. The family is close and has expectations, roles and responsibilities that are life long.
- Traditionally in Cambodia the father being the public head of the household will make decisions relating to their public life. Women have more control over domestic and household affairs including the family budget.
- In Australia smaller family units have sometimes become the norm, for many reasons. Many smaller family units came here due to the refugee or migration experiences, although some have had three generations. This separation of the traditional extended family appears to have affected families here. There sometimes have been family breakdowns. The traditional gender roles and also older people's roles have been challenged and changed here too.

Attitudes and Issues with Ageing

- In Cambodia, children and family members traditionally care for the ill and elderly. It is common for the older parents to be living in their home together with one or more of their adult children and families.
- In Australia older parents usually reside with one of their adult children and family. However, there is often a sense of isolation for many Cambodian older people related to their low levels of English, the often lack of transport and the separation of family.
- Intergenerational conflict does occur between older parents and their adult children. The older parents will often feel they have no major role in the family or that they are a problem for their children. However, grandparents here still play the vital role of carer for their grandchildren while the parents are at paid work.
- Cambodians here still believe that as one gets older they gain greater wisdom. They also believe that it's important to show respect and duty towards older people especially your own parents. When parents are old their children are expected to look after them.
- Family members may be reluctant to utilize aged care services like home help or residential care, because of the belief that by accepting such external help the family is failing in their duty to care for their older family member.
- Many Cambodian older persons here will visit the temples or the churches on a regular basis for devotion but also to connect socially with others and to lessen their isolation. There are no Cambodian Senior Citizen clubs in the South East.

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Attitudes and Issues to Disability and Mental Illness

- Cambodian people here as in Cambodia tend to look upon having a disability as something shameful. Some Cambodians believe that having a disability is a punishment for a wrong doing by the person or the family in a previous life or their current actions. This is called one's Karma; it is a key Buddhist belief.
- There is also a cultural stigma towards mental illness with many believing that mental illness comes about through the possession by bad spirits or bad karma. There is a feeling of great shame upon the family if one of its relatives becomes mentally ill. Mental illness is usually denied and feared. Families may try to deal with any mental illness “in-house” to avoid outsiders becoming aware of any problem.
- Many tend not to understand mental illness as there are no comparable terms in Khmer. As a consequence, Cambodians who are having emotional problems tend to present themselves for care with physical problems. Counseling as it is in Western society provided by trained persons is also an unknown concept to Cambodians. When advice is sought it was traditionally from a Monk, a traditional healer or the lay spiritual leader. Many are also afraid to take prescribed anti-depressants as they are afraid they may become addicted- it will make them feel like sleeping all the time and maybe never to awake.
- Cambodian people here may not be familiar with certain support services. The family traditionally took on role of caring for the ill and disabled. Consequently many are reluctant to use such services or would delay seeking care until family members become unmanageable.

Health Beliefs and Practices

- Traditionally in Cambodia, people have dealt with illness through self-care and self-medication. Health is often believed to be determined in part by the balance of natural forces. This is like the Chinese idea of ying and yang and for Cambodians it is influencing the ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ elements in the body. In the hot-cold theory, illness is caused by a change in the natural balance between the elements of hot and cold. To restore balance to the body adjustments are made through the intake of drugs, certain herbs and foods. Western medicines are usually “hot”, and herbal remedies are usually “cold”.
- Many Cambodians believe that illness can come about through spirit possession, the casting of a spell, bad karma and neglecting to do certain important rituals. Traditional healers (Kru Khmer) or spiritual healers are sometimes sought for illnesses thought to be caused by spirits. Healing is aided through the taking of traditional herbs, roots and plants from Cambodia and often these cannot be grown locally.
- Traditional treatments include herbs and natural medicines, varying amount of foods, massaging, cupping, pinching and coining on the skin, going to healers, going to the temple or church to be blessed and praying. Many people here are comfortable with using both Western and traditional treatments together. A Western medical practitioner is seen if their traditional treatments don't work.
- Some may resist using certain Western medical treatments, medications and tests. Buddhist beliefs for some Cambodians will influence their attitudes towards illness i.e. to accept you're suffering as a part of life. Especially with the older persons these beliefs may result in them not resolving their health issues.
- Medical instructions are sometimes not followed due to English language difficulties, and the practices of western medicine may not be well understood.

Past Torture and Trauma

- Most Cambodians here have suffered physical and psychological trauma resulting from the experiences of the “Khmer Rouge – Pol Pot” regime, the Vietnamese invasion and control of the country, the civil wars and for some escaping and trying to survive in the refugee camps.
- Internationally recognized bodies estimated between 1.5 - 3 million Cambodians (20% to 40% of the total population) died under the regime. People were murdered or died of starvation and disease. The population was “cleansed” of its past totally. Cambodian society is still recovering and will do so for generations.
- Some Cambodians avoid discussing or play down what occurred to them especially in the “Khmer Rouge - Pol Pot” regime. They may experience symptoms like: intrusive thoughts, regular nightmares, jumpy reactions, difficulty in relating to family, severe anxiety, sadness and loneliness, guilt or shame about leaving relatives behind, memory or concentration problems and extreme reactions to minimal stresses.
- Symptoms may become more apparent and be unable to be managed after many years of resettling here, even though people have bought their homes, cars, been married and their children now adult. Sometimes a dramatic event like a job loss, severe illness, death or family breakdown can trigger a strong response in someone.

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- It is not uncommon for Cambodians to experience psychiatric symptoms even after all these years because of their collective traumatic experiences. Common problems included post traumatic stress disorder, depression and for some, even thoughts of suicide.

Customs and Values:

In Australia, Cambodians very much adhere to these traditional values and customs especially older persons.

- A strong sense of family identity and loyalty and family issues stay within the family.
- Respect for their culture, older people and ancestors.
- Avoid shame to your family and oneself e.g. “Saving face”.
- Emotional self control is very important.
- Tendency to not complain about things and accept things the way they are.
- Modesty is important, especially for women.
- Visitors to homes are asked to remove shoes and the refusal of food or refreshments when offered, could cause offence.
- Character of a person is important e.g. Respectful, friendly, honest, decent and educated.
- Desire for smooth interpersonal relationships and to be non confrontational.
- Status and respect is given to Buddhist monks, important government officials and higher socio economic status individuals.

Communication Styles:

- Cambodians believe it is disrespectful to touch a person’s head. This is an important part of the body and it is where the spirit is. It is also disrespectful to point your feet at someone.
- Cambodians should bow slightly when walking in front of someone other than children as a sign of respect. . It is disrespectful to have eye contact with a person who is older or someone of higher status.
- Cambodian Buddhist monks are not allowed to touch females and avoid eye contact while talking.
- Cambodians usually don’t question instructions or authority.
- For Cambodians saying ‘Yes’ to someone may be a vague response to a question or a request. It does not necessarily mean agreement. While a response that may mean ‘no’ includes a no response or the changing of the topic or a statement like ‘it’s OK’ or ‘no problem’ or even a ‘yes’.
- It may take some time to develop trust, rapport and working relationships with Cambodians.
- Loud or showing off to others is not looked upon as positive.
- Cambodians usually avoid showing anger or becoming involved in a situation that is confrontational.
- Some of these customs, values and communication styles may differ or be modified for Cambodians here.

Naming Conventions

- Cambodians traditionally use the title of a person to address them formally e.g. “Mr”, “Mrs”, “Doctor”, etc.
- Cambodian names are written with the surname first and followed by the given name. Married women keep their maiden name and do not take the husband's name. Children can have either their father's surname or a personal name.
- Some Cambodians here have taken on the Australian ways of naming.
- Cambodians don’t usually recognize their names if they are pronounced differently. Cambodians may not even know a person by their full name but only their title or by the family they are from.
- There can be some confusion here for mainstream services where Cambodians go for assistance. These services may not be sure as to what order the names are and it can happen that Cambodian people have two files at the one service.

Greetings

- Cambodians traditionally greet each other by lifting up their pressed hands and palms together to the level of their chest and bow slightly. This is called *Som Pas*. The higher the hands and lower the bow the greater the respect. When meeting Cambodians they will *Som Pas* and say *Chum Reap Suer* (Hello).
- When leaving they will *Som Pas* and say *Chum Reap Lear* (Goodbye). Cambodians use *Som Pas* also to display respect. When used for greeting it would be considered rude not to return a *Som Pas*. A younger person should always be the first to *Som Pas* and bow and it is considered polite for the older person to respond back.

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- Traditionally Cambodians are not familiar to touching, especially those of the opposite gender.
- In Australia greeting etiquette has been modified by Cambodians. Sometimes men here may also shake hands. While women and especially older persons are reluctant to shake hands and still follow traditional greeting styles. Younger people here often shake hands, hug and kiss. Cambodians do appreciate a traditional greeting from individuals other than Cambodians.

English Greeting	Closest English Pronunciation for Khmer translation
Hello	CHUM REAP SUER
Goodbye	CHUM REAP LEAR
Yes	JA (female) / BAA (male)
No	TH'E
Thank you	OR KUN

Key Cambodian Festivals / Significant Dates

Cambodians traditionally follow the Buddhist Lunar Calendar. There are a number of important festivals and dates that Cambodians in Australia still adhere to and the dates of these change as per the Lunar Calendar.

- **Cambodian New Year** (Bonn Chaul Chanam) falls on mid April.
- **Ancestor's Day** (Bonn Pchum Ben) happens in September/October.
- **Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death Day** (Bonn Visak Bochea) in April/May.
- **Bonn Chol Vassa** (Buddhist Rains Retreat) is the start of Buddhist Lent and is usually in July. Celebrated in October -the **Bonn Kathen** is the end of Buddhist Lent.
- **Thngai Seila** are weekly Buddhist religious days marked on the calendar.
- **Thngai Penh Baur** are moon days
- **Thngnai Darc Bart** are nominated religious days by a particular temple on the last Sunday of the month.

Some of these significant days are celebrated here by the whole community as a community celebration (e.g. Cambodian New Year and Ancestor Day), while other days more devote Cambodians and especially older persons would usually visit the temple on these days to pray and listen to sermons and also offer cooked food to the monks.

Cambodians don't usually celebrate birthdays but it is common for older people to have a religious celebration called **Bonn Chomrurn Ar-yook** is organized by their children to bless their wellbeing and aging. However birthday celebrations are slowly changing for Cambodians in Australia especially with younger people being raised here.

For Cambodians here weddings are important family orientated celebrations too.

There are other important dates followed by Cambodians from Chinese and Vietnamese ethnicity and those from religious traditions like Christianity and Muslim.

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Services and activities useful for Cambodian older people in the South East Region of Melbourne*

Organisation	Services/Activities
<p>Cambodian Association of Victoria 52 Queens Avenue, Springvale. 3171</p> <p>Ph: 9546 3466 Fax: 9546 3604 www.cambodianassociation.com.au</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned Activity Group for low care involving exercise Monday and Friday weekly • Casework, information, referral & advocacy • Migration advice • Community education • Counselling • Cambodian Radio Program 3ZZZ. <p><i>Eligibility: Greater Dandenong, Casey</i></p>
<p>City of Greater Dandenong</p> <p>Community Care Services Ph: 8558 7902</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned Activity Group for older Cambodians with low care needs. Thursday weekly. <p><i>Eligibility: Greater Dandenong</i></p>
<p>Cambodian Mutual Death Association</p> <p>24 Springvalley Drive, Clayton South. 3169 Ph: 948 3973</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice and financial contributions for Theravada Buddhist funerals. • Cambodians need to be members to get assistance.
<p>Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre</p> <p>39 Clow Street Dandenong, Vic, 3175 Phone: 9767 1900 Fax: 9706 8830</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multicultural PAGs Core and High • Positive Ageing Programs (Strength Training, Warm Water Exercise, Tai Chi) • Carer Support Program • Volunteer Visiting Program • Community Visitors Scheme • Access and Support Program • Healthy Ageing Project (Cambodian) <p><i>Eligibility: Greater Dandenong, Casey & Cardinia</i></p>

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Cambodian Religious Centres

There are 4 Cambodian Theravada Buddhist Temples in the catchment providing spiritual and emotional support and advice, religious services, teaching and meditation.

Cambodian Buddhist Association of Victoria (Wat Budhharangsi)

159 Clarke Road, Springvale South. 3172
Ph: 9546 2432 or 9546 3466
<http://www.cbav.org/home/home.htm>

Khmer Buddhist Centre of Victoria (Wat Khmer Melbourne)

458-462 Springvale Road, Springvale South. 3172
Ph: 9548 5285

Cambodian Temple of Victoria (Wat Dhammaram)

53 Balmoral Avenue, Springvale 3171
Ph: 9540 3374

The Institute of Buddhism Education and Development (Wat Monirangsi)

4 Cootamundra Drive, Doveton. 3177
Ph: 9792 2906
<http://www.watmonirangsi.org/>

There is one Cambodian Christian Church in the catchment providing spiritual and emotional support and advice, religious services and teaching.

Cambodian Australian Christian Church

11-13 Hooker Avenue, Springvale 3171
Ph: 9558 4033 Fax: 9512 3881

*** This resource list of services (other than local Council HACC), has been prepared for aged care staff in the Council areas of Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia. Some services and activities listed are in fact available to residents beyond these three municipalities.**