

Ukrainian Culture and Foods

DECEMBER 11, 2023

Stereotyping

This is very basic level information about the culture described. It is meant to offer staff an opportunity to learn in general terms; it cannot account for the diversity within each individual society or culture and is not meant, in any way, to infer to all people.

Background

Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe. In size, it is slightly smaller than the state of Texas.



On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded and occupied parts of Ukraine in a major escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The invasion has resulted in Europe’s largest refugee crisis since World War II. Displacement, violence, and destruction of infrastructure have forced more than 9 million Ukrainians to flee their homes and seek refuge in other countries, including the United States. Almost 90% of displaced Ukrainian cases are women, children, and people over the age of 60. Men between 18 and 60 are not allowed to leave Ukraine due to martial law, with some exceptions.

Language

Ukrainian is the official language of Ukraine, but many Ukrainians speak Russian as their native language. It is important to confirm the language needs and ensure appropriate interpretation while working with Ukrainians coming from different regions.

Health Disparities

The life expectancy is similar to the United States (U.S.), in Ukraine females live approximately 77 years, and 67 years for males. In 2020, Ukraine had an infant mortality rate of 7/1,000 live births. This is greater than the U.S. infant mortality rate of 5.4/1,000 live births.

Potential Health Conditions:

- Hepatitis B virus (HBV) and Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection
- Tuberculosis (TB)
- HIV: Over 250,000 Ukrainian people are living with HIV with a 0.1% prevalence in 2020 among both males and females. A history of intravenous drug use is a major risk factor for HIV infection.
- Vaccine-preventable diseases (VPD): VPDs including pertussis, measles, chickenpox, diphtheria, varicella, hepatitis A, and paralytic polio, should be considered. Vaccination coverage in Ukraine is among the lowest in the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region and is at or below the target threshold for immunizations.

Potential Health Disparities:

- Limited Access to Healthcare: Language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of knowledge about available resources can make it difficult to navigate and access appropriate healthcare.
- Trauma and Mental Health: The psychological impact of displacement, loss, and exposure to violence can lead to mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Limited access to culturally sensitive mental health services can exacerbate these issues.
- Language and Communication Barriers: Language barriers can impede effective communication between Ukrainian newcomers and healthcare providers, leading to misunderstandings, misdiagnoses, or inadequate treatment.
- Cultural Differences and Health Beliefs: Ukrainian newcomers may have different health beliefs, cultural practices, and perceptions of illness and treatment compared to the mainstream U.S. population.
- Socioeconomic Factors: Socioeconomic factors include limited financial resources, lack of employment opportunities, and lower education levels. These factors can affect access to nutritious food, housing conditions, and the ability to afford healthcare services or medications.

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Family is very important in Ukrainian culture, and extended family ties are valued. Couples often get married in their early 20s, and the average family has one or two children. Commonly, the grandmother is an esteemed and respected family member. It is common for young people to live with their parents until they get married or can afford their own home. Many elderly

UKRAINIAN CULTURE & FOODS

parents live with their adult children. In urban areas, both parents usually work outside the home, entrusting childcare either to grandparents or close relatives.

Ukrainians come from a society with deep-rooted traditional views on identity roles, family dynamics, and religious and social norms. Ukrainians may have difficulties interacting with people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. They also may not want to participate in certain events or holidays unfamiliar to them, like a Halloween party.

Ukrainian culture, like any culture, has certain taboos or topics that are considered sensitive or inappropriate to discuss openly.

- **Greetings:** For Ukrainians, social interaction is important. When meeting someone for the first time, greet each person individually as a sign of respect and acknowledgement. Handshaking is common and it is important to maintain eye contact throughout the greeting.
- **Talking about Death:** Death is a sensitive topic, and discussions about death or referring to someone's passing may be avoided or approached with caution. It is important to be respectful and mindful of this cultural sensitivity when interacting with Ukrainians.
- **Superstitions and Folk Beliefs:** Ukrainians have a rich tradition of superstitions and folk beliefs that are deeply ingrained in their culture. Examples include avoiding walking under ladders, the belief in the power of certain objects or rituals and associating certain events or occurrences with good or bad luck. It is important to respect these beliefs and not dismiss them as mere superstition.
- **Personal Finances:** Talking about personal finances, income, or asking direct questions about someone's financial status is generally considered impolite or intrusive in Ukrainian culture. To make participants comfortable, staff should be clear that income information is used to confirm eligibility and assure them that their privacy will be respected.

Culture & Foods

Understanding the importance of food in one's culture is essential to WIC nutrition education. Ukrainian food has influences from Russia, Poland, Germany, and Turkey. Popular ingredients include meat, mushrooms, various vegetables, fruits, and herbs. Many dishes are prepared from potatoes and cabbage. The most famous vegetable dish is borscht (beet soup). Onions and garlic are widely used in Ukrainian cuisine. Dumplings are also a national Ukrainian dish. Bread is a staple of the Ukrainian diet, and no meal is ever served without it. Also very popular is the preparation of dishes made from grain; they are most often prepared as a separate dish ("kasha"). The most common are buckwheat and wheat porridge. Typical cooking methods are boiling, stewing, and baking. In Ukraine, families typically consume three daily meals with the mid-day meal being the largest. However, eating habits may have changed with arrival in the U.S.

Pregnancy

Ukrainian culture has various practices and beliefs surrounding pregnancy, reflecting a blend of traditional customs and modern medical care. It's important to note that while these practices exist, individual beliefs and practices may vary among families and regions in Ukraine.

- **Prenatal Care:** Prenatal care is highly valued and pregnant women are encouraged to seek regular medical check-ups throughout their pregnancy. Prenatal vitamin intake is also a common practice.
- **Nutritious Diet:** A healthy and balanced diet is emphasized during pregnancy to support the well-being of both the mother and the baby. Traditional Ukrainian foods such as soups, stews, whole grains, vegetables, and dairy products are often incorporated into the diet.
- **Support from Family and Community:** pregnancy is seen as a significant event, and expecting mothers often receive support from their families and communities. Family members may help with household chores, provide emotional support, and share traditional wisdom regarding pregnancy and childbirth.
- **Pregnancy Superstitions:** Ukrainian culture has various superstitions associated with pregnancy. For example, pregnant women may avoid attending funerals or walking near cemeteries to prevent any negative energy from affecting the baby. Additionally, certain actions or objects, such as holding a baby shoe for good luck or avoiding the color black, may be observed to ensure a healthy pregnancy. One should not prepare a room for a baby and buy baby clothes during pregnancy. The baby should be born first.

Postpartum Beliefs & Practices

Ukrainian postpartum practices include a combination of traditional beliefs, customs, and practical care for the mother and newborn. Here are some notable practices:

- **Forty Days of Rest:** It is believed that the first forty days after childbirth are crucial for the mother's recovery and bonding with the baby. During this time, the mother is encouraged to rest, avoid strenuous activities, and receive help from family members or postpartum caregivers.
- **Warmth and Protection:** Keeping the mother and newborn warm is considered essential. The baby is often swaddled tightly to provide a sense of security, and both mother and baby are kept away from drafts and cold environments.
- **Herbal Remedies:** Herbal remedies are commonly used to support postpartum recovery. These may include herbal teas, baths, or compresses made from plants believed to have healing properties, such as chamomile, nettle, or yarrow.
- **Dietary Considerations:** Traditional Ukrainian postpartum diets often emphasize nutrient-rich foods to support the mother's recovery and breastfeeding. This may include soups, broths, cooked grains, nourishing herbs, and foods believed to promote milk production.

- **Support from Family and Community:** Ukrainian culture places great importance on the support of family and the community during the postpartum period. Family members and close friends often help with household chores, cooking, and caring for older children, allowing the mother to focus on her recovery and bonding with the newborn.

Breastfeeding

In Ukrainian society, there is generally a positive attitude towards breastfeeding, and it is commonly viewed as the preferred method of feeding infants. Breast milk is recognized for its nutritional value and health benefits for both the baby and the mother. Even after starting solids, breastfeeding is often continued up to 2 years of age alongside solid foods, as it is considered an important source of nutrition and comfort for the baby.

While breastfeeding, a balanced diet is encouraged. Some old wives' tales would suggest hot tea, chicken or beef broth and even dark beer to promote lactation. For those returning to work, expression of milk is normal.

Extended family members, such as grandmothers, aunts, and sisters, play an active role in supporting breastfeeding mothers by providing advice, encouragement, and practical help.

War has drastically impacted the breastfeeding rates of many Ukrainians. Due to the trauma placed on many of the displaced families, it may be common that early introduction of infant formula and foods occurs.

Formula Feeding

While breastfeeding is generally encouraged in Ukrainian culture, formula feeding is also practiced and accepted. Some parents may choose to formula feed their babies for various reasons, such as personal preferences, medical reasons, or logistical considerations.

Transitioning to formula early during times of crisis is common. Ready-to-feed and powdered formula is made available through humanitarian assistance to many of the displaced families.

Starting solids

Introduction of complementary foods commonly occurs between 4-5 months of age. Ukrainian culture may influence the types of foods introduced to babies. For instance, sour cream, cottage cheese, and fermented dairy products like kefir may be introduced early as they are commonly consumed in Ukrainian cuisine.

Many Ukrainian parents prefer to prepare homemade baby food using fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Popular first foods include mashed potatoes, carrots, and rice or buckwheat porridge. These foods are often cooked and blended into a smooth consistency suitable for the baby. Displaced families that lack access to food are commonly offered commercially prepared infant foods by humanitarian assistance programs.

Ukrainian families often prioritize sharing meals together. As babies start solids, they may be included in family meals, eating foods such as borscht (beet soup) and varenyky (dumplings), appropriately prepared and modified to fit the infant's needs.

Parenting

Parenting practices vary widely, but in Ukraine, it is common for parents to prioritize their child's education and discipline, while also emphasizing respect and family values. Ukrainian parents often engage in activities such as storytelling, singing, and spending quality time with their children to foster emotional bonding and cognitive development. Family is highly valued in Ukrainian culture and extended family members often play an active role in childcare and support parents in raising their children.

Holidays & Celebrations

Ukrainian culture places importance on hospitality, family values, and celebrating traditions such as Easter, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Embroidery is a significant part of Ukrainian culture. Traditional embroidered shirts, known as vyshyvankas, are worn on special occasions.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about Ukrainian culture and ways that you may offer support and encouragement to all our WIC families.

Resources

[Complementary Feeding: Children Born To Ukrainian Immigrant Families](#). Association of State Public Health Nutritionist (ASPHN). Last updated January 26, 2023.

[Ukrainian Customs and Traditions](#) - Greentour. July 26, 2020.

[Cultural Backgrounder](#) The Ukrainian Crisis & Refugees from Ukraine. International Rescue Committee, UK. Last updated April 2022. (virginia.gov)

[Ukraine](#) National Geographic Kids. Boatner, K. April 7, 2022.

[Ukrainian - Health and Culture Resources](#). EthnoMed. (2023, April 26). - EthnoMed.

[CORE and Refugee Housing Solutions to Partner + Resource Round-up](#). Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE). Franz, A. April 18, 2023.

[The health needs of refugees from Ukraine](#). British Medical Journal (BMJ). Hodgson, I. C. April 5, 2022.

[Refugee and International Health](#) - MN Dept. of Health. Last updated July 7, 2023.

[Ukraine Refugee Situation](#). Operational Data Portal. 2023.

[Cultural Quick Reference Guide: Ukraine](#). Southeastern National Tuberculosis Center (SNTC). April 28, 2022.

[Ukrainian Clinical Guidance](#). Minnesota Department of Health. Updated July 6, 2023.

[Brief Overview for Clinicians Caring for Ukrainian New Arrivals](#). Center of Excellence in Newcomer Health- Minnesota. July 15, 2022.

[The Current State of Breastfeeding in Ukraine: An Interview With Lidiia Romanenko and Olha Shlemkevych](#). Journal of Human Lactation. 2023, Vol. 39(1) 15-21.

Reference – Complete Listing of Hyperlinks

[Complementary Feeding: Children Born To Ukrainian Immigrant Families](https://asphn.org/transition-feeding-mini-brief-ukraine/)
(<https://asphn.org/transition-feeding-mini-brief-ukraine/>)

[Ukrainian Customs and Traditions](https://greentourua.com/ukrainian-customs-and-traditions/) (<https://greentourua.com/ukrainian-customs-and-traditions/>)

[Cultural Backgrounder](https://dss.virginia.gov/files/division/cvs/ona/ukrainian_arrivals/information_about_uniting_f_or_ukraine/Backgrounder_Ukraine_07May22w.pdf)
(https://dss.virginia.gov/files/division/cvs/ona/ukrainian_arrivals/information_about_uniting_f_or_ukraine/Backgrounder_Ukraine_07May22w.pdf)

[Ukraine](https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/ukraine) (<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/ukraine>)

[Ukrainian - Health and Culture Resources](https://ethnomed.org/resource/ukrainian-health-and-culture-resources/) (<https://ethnomed.org/resource/ukrainian-health-and-culture-resources/>)

[CORE and Refugee Housing Solutions to Partner + Resource Round-up](https://coresourceexchange.org/2023/04/18/core-and-refugee-housing-solutions-to-partner/)
(<https://coresourceexchange.org/2023/04/18/core-and-refugee-housing-solutions-to-partner/>)

[The health needs of refugees from Ukraine](https://www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o864) (<https://www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o864>)

[Refugee and International Health](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih) (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih>)

[Ukraine Refugee Situation](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine) (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>)

[Cultural Quick Reference Guide: Ukraine](https://sntc.medicine.ufl.edu/home/index#/products/168)
(<https://sntc.medicine.ufl.edu/home/index#/products/168>)

[Ukrainian Clinical Guidance](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/ukrainian.html)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/ukrainian.html>)

[Brief Overview for Clinicians Caring for Ukrainian New Arrivals](https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/ukrainianbrief.pdf)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/rih/about/ukrainianbrief.pdf>)

[The Current State of Breastfeeding in Ukraine: An Interview With Lidiia Romanenko and Olha Shlemkevych](https://library.dmed.org.ua/uploads/files/2023-07/1690367999_the-current-state-of-breastfeeding.pdf) (https://library.dmed.org.ua/uploads/files/2023-07/1690367999_the-current-state-of-breastfeeding.pdf)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program 625 Robert St N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; To obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.