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## Discussing spirituality with patients: a rational and ethical approach.

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**BACKGROUND:** This study was undertaken to determine when patients feel that physician inquiry about spirituality or religious beliefs is appropriate, reasons why they want their physicians to know about their spiritual beliefs, and what they want physicians to do with this information. **METHODS:** Trained research assistants administered a questionnaire to a convenience sample of consenting patients and accompanying adults in the waiting rooms of 4 family practice residency training sites and 1 private group practice in northeastern Ohio. Demographic information, the SF-12 Health Survey, and participant ratings of appropriate situations, reasons, and expectations for physician discussions of spirituality or religious beliefs were obtained. **RESULTS:** Of 1,413 adults who were asked to respond, 921 completed questionnaires, and 492 refused (response rate = 65%). Eighty-three percent of respondents wanted physicians to ask about spiritual beliefs in at least some circumstances. The most acceptable scenarios for spiritual discussion were life-threatening illnesses (77%), serious medical conditions (74%) and loss of loved ones (70%). Among those who wanted to discuss spirituality, the most important reason for discussion was desire for physician-patient understanding (87%). Patients believed that information concerning their spiritual beliefs would affect physicians' ability to encourage realistic hope (67%), give medical advice (66%), and change medical treatment (62%). **CONCLUSIONS:** This study helps clarify the nature of patient preferences for spiritual discussion with physicians.