



# The Health of Refugees from Iraq

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## 4.7 million Iraqis have fled their homes in recent years due to war, violence and instability within their borders.

Escape from violence and persecution has caused hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to seek refuge outside Iraq. Violence due to extremism has created schisms in mixed Sunni-Shi'i regions, while non-Muslim minorities continue to be vulnerable to religious and ethnic persecution. Along with the millions fleeing Iraq, over 2.7 million people are internally displaced within their own country. Repatriation for refugees is often not a safe or viable option, even

when violence subsides and stability returns. Of those who have returned to Iraq, many have found their property occupied, only to suffer secondary displacement. Exhausted resources in neighboring countries of asylum, has left massive number of Iraqi refugees vulnerable and in need of safe refuge elsewhere. As of 2008, more than 16,200 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in the United States. The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has recently recommended up to 50,000 Iraqis for resettlement.

### Primary Causes of Iraqi Refugees' Health Concerns

- A devastated medical infrastructure as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf War, and the 2003 US invasion. Only approximately 10-15% of Iraq's medical needs are currently being met.
- Greatly decreased capacity of the health system. As of 2006, 2000 physicians have been killed and over 18,000 have fled the country.
- Resulting mental health conditions following traumatic acts of violence or kidnappings. In a survey of 754 Iraqi refugees commissioned in 2008 by the UNHCR, every respondent reported experiencing some form of trauma.
- Maternal and child malnutrition. According to Iraq's ministry of health, more than half of Iraqi children and women suffer from malnutrition and anemia, leading to many serious health conditions and high maternal and infant mortality.
- High rates of amputations and paralysis for many victims of war, particularly for those internally displaced.

### Health Problems as They Transition to America

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Iraq boasted some of the best medical care and top doctors in the region. Since much of the health care system was government owned, Iraqis have enjoyed quality medical care at little to no cost. The shock of navigating the U.S. healthcare system is very difficult for them. In addition to being victims of trauma, many of the refugees resettling in the United States were from high level society, are separated from their families, and find the transitions of learning a new culture very stressful. Hence, susceptibility to mental health issues is high. Diets and lifestyles also contribute to vulnerability to chronic diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes. Finding affordable halal foods that are familiar is an important issue related to proper nutrition. Iraqi refugees often have difficulty in finding health care that provides the cultural sensitivity and dignity that they deserve.

### Additional Resources

- U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees: [www.unhcr.org/country/irq](http://www.unhcr.org/country/irq)  
World Health Organization: [www.who.int/countries/irq](http://www.who.int/countries/irq)  
Cultural Resource Center: [www.cal.org/co/pdffiles/iraqis.pdf](http://www.cal.org/co/pdffiles/iraqis.pdf)



### MAJOR HEALTH ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY IRAQI REFUGEES

- Meningitis
- Respiratory Infections
- Diabetes
- Tuberculosis
- Ischaemic Heart Disease
- Diarrheal Diseases
- Perinatal Conditions
- Cerebrovascular Disease
- Parasitic Diseases
- Anemia
- Congenital Disorders
- Mental Health Disorders (particularly depression and PTSD)
- Typhoid (in rural areas)
- Hypertension

International Rescue Committee  
[www.theIRC.org](http://www.theIRC.org)