

Cultural Do's and Don'ts: Vietnamese Elderly

- Most Vietnamese elderly are quite shy and do not engage in any physical show of affection. Hugging and touching only comes with familiarity. Most elderly do not kiss their children, grandchildren, babies or loved ones. They gently sniff the cheek of the child, relative, or loved one instead.
- It is most appropriate to slightly bow on greeting an elder and to shake hands if the elder extends his/her hand first.
- The most offensive disrespect is to touch an elder on the head, which is offensive in many other countries. Touching the heads of children is culturally allowed.
- Speak softly when addressing an elder and look straight into their eyes; however, don't stare for too long as this is considered defying them.
- Almost all Vietnamese elderly follow Confucian laws, which are highly male-centered and along very clear male hierarchical lines.
- When entering a Vietnamese home, it is not necessary to take off shoes.
- Allow the elder to drink or eat first.
- Home visits often begin with an offer to share tea. This is a culturally significant act of hospitality. Guests arriving at mealtimes are invited to share the meal if they are close friends or relatives.
- An often confusing trait is the Vietnamese way of answering. Nodding the head up and down signifies a "yes," but oftentimes means "no" and can only be interpreted in context of what is being asked or considered. Shaking the head right and left categorically means "no."
- Almost all elderly have shrines in their homes. The color white is used for funerals. Red means luck, and dark green signifies misfortune.

Asian & Pacific Islander Older Adults Task Force
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Traditional Holidays

**January or
February** (lunar
calendar)

- “Tet” (Lunar New Year) – This is the most important holiday of the year – celebrated for a week, and calculated on the lunar calendar. Tet brings families together in celebration of peace, prosperity, and unity. Tet is also a birthday time to celebrate for the entire population since individual birthdays are not recognized.

April

- “Thanh Minh” – 5th day of the 3rd lunar month. Also called the Feast of the Pure Light, this festival marks the time when people visit graves of relatives to bring food and flowers.

May 28

- Celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.

**August 15 or 7th
lunar month**

- “Trung Nguyen” – Wandering Souls Days is a Buddhist observance and honors souls of the dead and those dead who are homeless. It is the second largest festival after Tet. Prayers are offered and “sins” are forgiven.

**September or
October 8th lunar
month**

- “Trung Thu” – Autumn Festival where moon cakes are eaten and children parade through the streets with lanterns.

December 25

- Christmas holiday