

Talking with Your Older Patients about Firearms

HOW YOU CAN HELP

As a primary care provider, you have a key role in keeping your patients safe and lowering their risk of suicide. More than 70% of suicides among older adults involve a firearm. Certain conditions, such as cognitive impairment and depression, make firearm suicide and accidental injury more likely.

SMALL CHANGES CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

One of the most effective ways to reduce suicide risk is to put time and distance between the person who is at-risk and lethal means (e.g., firearms, medications). Among households who lock firearms, the odds of firearm injury and mortality were 73% lower than among households with unlocked firearms (Grossman, 2005). When looking at state policies, studies have shown that safe storage policies are associated with 8-19% reductions in unintentional and intentional firearm injuries and mortality, depending on the policy (Smart, 2023).

TALKING TO YOUR PATIENTS

Clinicians are in a unique position to counsel patients at risk for firearm suicide. Research shows (Boggs, et al 2020) that firearm assessment can help prevent suicide and that older adults welcome conversations with their primary care providers about firearms (Betz, 2016). This handout will help you approach the topic of firearm safety with your patients. It can also be helpful to familiarize yourself with the basics of firearms and storage options. See: [Talking with your Older Patients about Firearms](#)

Preparing for the discussion

Just having a firearm in the home is a risk factor for suicide, independent of the following risk factors, any of which will further increase the risk of suicide:

- Recent health diagnosis
 - dementia
 - cancer
 - ALS/Huntington's Disease/Parkinson's
- Depression and/or other mental illnesses
- Ongoing pain
- Feeling isolated and alone
- Frequent alcohol and/or drug use
- Loss of independence
- Loss of a loved one/animal
- Other major stressful life events (e.g., financial problems, job loss)

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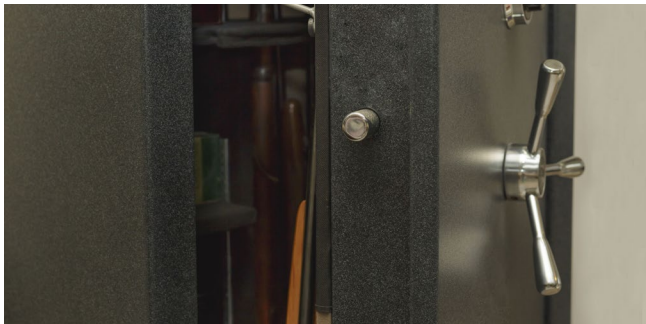
Conversation Starters

Start with: Many people in this country have firearms, and having firearms in the home can pose threats to peoples' safety – so I just wanted to check in about whether you have any in your home. Follow up questions for those who indicate that they have firearms in their home:

- How many firearms do you have?
 - Even if they have many, help where you can by taking a harm reduction approach which has been shown to reduce morbidity and mortality (Leslie, 2008). Harm reduction refers to reducing the harms associated with certain behaviors.
- And tell me, how do you store it/them?
 - If not stored safely, discuss safe storage options with them (see next page).
- Are there any you no longer use?
 - If yes, you can discuss safe storage and/or removing the firearms they no longer use.
- Are you willing to part with any of your firearms?
 - If yes, you can suggest that they call the non-emergency line of their local police department to determine next steps.
 - If they are unwilling to store firearms safely or part with their firearms, but are willing to discuss it with you, you could focus on understanding the risks to others in their household. e.g. "Is there anyone who visits your home who might be at risk for selfharm or suicide, or have any major health concerns, including depression? Are there ever children in your home who could come across the firearm and inadvertently fire it?"

STORAGE OPTIONS

Note: Most firearms are equipped with a mechanism that helps prevent accidental firing, called a safety. **Safeties are not a substitute for storing firearms unloaded and locked.** They are prone to failure and are often left off by accident.



1

LONG GUN SAFES

- Pros: Can also store handguns; Less likely to be stolen due to size and weight.
- Cons: Heavy, difficult to move; Most expensive option (\$300 to several thousand).



2

LOCK BOXES (FOR HANDGUNS)

- Pros: Cost effective (under \$100 with key or combination lock, more expensive with biometric mechanisms).
- Cons: Risk of theft, small safes should be bolted down.



3

CABLE LOCKS, TRIGGER LOCKS, AND BARREL LOCKS

- Pros: Inexpensive, sometimes free through local programs - check with police or consult [this list](#). Cable locks can be used for multiple weapons.
- Cons: Generally less secure than other options. Trigger locks are more prone to accidental discharge.

TRANSFER OPTIONS

Most states allow police stations or firearm retailers to provide temporary or permanent out-of-home storage. You may recommend this to patients, but make sure they always call before bringing a firearm anywhere. Your clinic might consider researching your state laws on transfer and including this information in after-visit summaries.

CITATIONS

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Boggs, JM, Beck, A, Ritzwoller, DP et al. A Quasi-Experimental Analysis of Lethal Means Assessment and Risk for Subsequent Suicide Attempts and Deaths. J GEN INTERN MED 35, 1709-1714 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-020-05641-4>

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