

HOW TO TALK WITH PATIENTS ABOUT FIREARM SAFETY

Discussing firearm safety with patients is an essential aspect of preventive healthcare. By addressing this topic with respect and a focus on safety, healthcare providers can foster a constructive dialogue that significantly enhances the safety of home environments.

DO

APPROACH THE TOPIC WITH SENSITIVITY AND RESPECT

Remember, for many gun owners, having a gun in the home is their way of protecting their loved ones. It can also be part of a cultural upbringing, means of providing, or even sport. Approaching a firearm as an object of risk, while true, may alienate a patient. As such, it is best to:

- Begin the conversation in a non-judgmental and open-ended manner.
- Use empathetic language to show that your primary concern is the patient’s safety and well-being.
- Remember to frame the conversation as a standard one, done with every patient, as opposed to a targeted conversation.
- For example, “As part of our routine safety checks, we talk to all of our patients about home safety, including the safe storage of medications and firearms. Are your medications safely stored? Do you have any firearms at home?”
- Ask open-ended questions to understand their specific situation and practices.
- For example, “How do you store your firearms?”; “What steps do you take to ensure that your firearms are kept out of reach of children and unauthorized users?”

ASSESS, THEN EDUCATE ON THE RISKS AND BENEFITS

Many gun owners are not moved solely by statistics related to firearm death or injury. While those should be provided, or given via take-away literature, one of the best ways to educate your patient is by relating firearm safety information to their specific situation. Do they have children or elderly loved ones in the home? Have they or a household member expressed suicidal thoughts before? Make sure the information provided is tailored to their experience. While doing that, be sure to:

- Provide information on the risks associated with having firearms in the home, such as unintentional shootings and suicides.
- Discuss the benefits of safe storage practices to prevent unauthorized access.

FOCUS ON SAFE STORAGE

By focusing on storage solutions, you're letting the firearm owner know that you trust them and respect their decision to own a firearm — but that you also want to make sure they're aware of the options available to further protect themselves and their family. Many gun owners safely store all their firearms except for one, which they have easily accessible in case needed for home defense. As such:

- Emphasize the importance of safe storage practices for all guns in the home, including using gun safes, lock boxes, and trigger locks.
- Keep in mind there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and finding a storage method that is the correct fit for the patient should be collaborative.
- If the patient says they securely store their firearms, ask what methods they use and if all firearms are securely stored.
- Recommend storing firearms unloaded and keeping ammunition stored separately.
- Take a harm-reduction approach; while it is ideal that all firearms be stored unloaded and separate from ammunition, you may not get to that point within an initial visit. What can be done today to improve the safety of your patient?
- Keep in mind alternative methods of storage — for example, storing firearms outside the home.



BE PREPARED WITH RESOURCES

Many patients may be uncomfortable with having this conversation with you face-to-face or in the moment. Having take-home resources for them is therefore essential as well as sharing that they can reach out to you or your practice for more information. It is vital to:

- Have brochures or resources on firearm safety to give to patients. (See our printable resources.)
- Know local resources/what your medical system can provide.
- Familiarize yourself with state and local gun laws. Some areas have specific safe storage requirements for gun owners.

RESPECT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Because of the often politicized nature of firearms in the U.S., patients may worry that talking to you about their status as a firearm owner and their storage behaviors may lead to legal or social problems. Stress to them that you are speaking to them as a medical provider, worried only for their health and safety.

- Assure patients that the conversation is confidential.
 - Avoid documenting unnecessary details in the patient’s medical record unless it is directly relevant to their health and safety; if possible, make sure the patient knows that.
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DON'T

BE CONFRONTATIONAL OR JUDGMENTAL

- Avoid language that could make the patient feel defensive or judged.
- Do not lecture or impose personal beliefs about gun ownership.
- Do not position yourself as a firearms expert (unless you are).

ASSUME OR NEGLECT CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

- Do not assume that patients do or do not own firearms, or that those who do are not practicing safe storage.
- Be aware of cultural, regional, and individual differences in attitudes toward firearms.
- Approach the topic with cultural competence and respect.

IGNORE SIGNS OF IMMEDIATE RISK:

If there are signs of immediate risk, such as suicidal ideation, address them promptly and involve necessary mental health resources or emergency services.

Learn if your state has extreme risk protective orders (ERPOs), which in some areas permit healthcare professionals to file for a civil court order to remove firearms from an individual who is at risk of harming themselves or others. (Visit erpo.org for more information, including to learn whether your state has an ERPO law.)