

LANCASTER GENERAL HEALTH

Firearms & Mental Health: Safe Storage Considerations

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Storing firearms safely is **the number 1 way** to help prevent misuse of firearms, including suicide. Preventing unauthorized access can be the difference between **a life saved and a tragedy**.

- Around **82% of adolescent firearm suicides** involve a firearm belonging to a family member
- When looking at all ages, **more than 50%** of all suicide deaths are by firearm

Protecting High Risk Individuals

Approach mental health and suicide prevention the **same** way you do other health and safety issues.

Talking with loved ones about mental health can help protect them and give them the support they need. Talking does **not** increase risk. Mental health experts agree that having the conversation doesn't spark the idea of suicide, but relieves those struggling with the notion.

Follow these steps to practice safe firearm storage:

1. Store firearms **unloaded and locked**
2. **Store and lock** ammunition (ammo) separately from firearms
3. Make sure key and/or combination is inaccessible to unauthorized people

Methods of Storage

There are **multiple** options to consider when storing your firearms:

- **Cable lock** – Using a cable lock requires the firearm to be unloaded. By storing the keys and ammo in separate areas, it takes more time to unlock and assemble the firearm. Suicide is often a fleeting thought. The time needed to assemble a firearm stored with a cable lock can give time for the suicidal thought to pass.
- **Gun Safe** – Although gun safes can provide quick access to a firearm in an emergency, quick access is something to avoid around a high-risk individual. If you prefer to use a gun safe for quick access, make sure high-risk individuals do **not** have your combination.
- **External storage** – If you or a loved one is at risk of self-harm or suicide, consider asking a trusted friend or relative to temporarily or permanently store your firearms.

- Additional firearm storage resources
- A schedule of in-person classes (availability of in-person classes depends on grant funding)

Signs & Symptoms of Mental Health Crisis

Individuals thinking about suicide often don't believe that they can be helped. Be active and persistent in helping someone get the resources they need.

Suicide Risk Factors & Warning Signs Include:

- Family history of suicide
- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- History of mental illness
- History of alcohol and substance abuse; increasing substance use
- Feelings of hopelessness and isolation
- Experiencing some sort of loss
- Easy access to lethal methods
- Talking about wanting to kill oneself, having no reason to live, feeling trapped, or being a burden to others
- **Looking for a way to kill oneself**, such as searching online or **buying a gun**
- Engaging in self-harming behaviors
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Preoccupation with death
- Suddenly happier, calmer
- Loss of interest in things previously cared about
- Contacting loved ones to say goodbye
- Making arrangements; setting one's affairs in order
- Giving away prized possessions

How to Help Someone in Crisis:

- Be willing to listen; allow their expression of feelings, and accept and validate those feelings
- Be non-judgmental and patient
- Be available; show interest, understanding, and support
- **Remove lethal means of self-harm** such as pills, ropes, **firearms**, alcohol or other drugs
- Get help from others with more experience and expertise
- Actively encourage the person to see a mental health professional as soon as possible and make sure that an appointment is made
- Don't act shocked, ask "why" or be sworn to secrecy

If you suspect your loved one is in crisis or faces an imminent risk, the best thing to do is to contact a crisis outreach center immediately.

Mental Health Resources:

- Lancaster County Crisis Intervention: 717-394-2631
- National Suicide Prevention LifeLine: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Text Crisis Line: Text "MHA" to 741741
- Central PA CONTACT (for someone to listen): 800-932-3616
- Pennsylvania 2-1-1: Dial 2-1-1 OR (855) 501-6785
- Mental Health America of Lancaster County (M-F, 9a-4p): 717-397-7461, mha@mhalancaster.org

Sources:

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Gun Violence Solutions. "Safe & Secure Gun Storage Prevents Injuries." <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-06/ask-me-3-safe-gun-storage-english.pdf>.

Project ChildSafe. "Discussing Mental Health." <https://projectchildsafe.org/discussing-mental-health/>

Project ChildSafe. "Securing Your Firearm." <https://projectchildsafe.org/securing-your-firearm/>

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