

LETHAL MEANS SAFETY

Lethal means are objects (e.g., medications, firearms, sharp instruments) that can be used to inflict self-directed violence. Lethal Means Safety is an intentional, voluntary practice to reduce one's suicide risk by limiting access to lethal means.

Reducing access to lethal means is an important part of a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention.

Why It's Important

- Many suicide attempts take place during a short-term crisis, so it is important to consider a person's access to lethal means during these periods of increased risk.
- Access to lethal means is a risk factor for suicide.
- Reducing access to lethal means saves lives.
- Firearms are the most lethal among suicide methods.

What Can We Do

Families, organizations, health care providers, and policymakers can take many actions to reduce access to lethal means of self-harm. Some of these are general household health and safety precautions that should be used regardless of suicide risk. Examples include limiting access to medications and storing firearms safely when not in use.

Other actions may be more appropriate when a person is at risk for suicide. If someone in the home is feeling suicidal, has recently attempted suicide, or is experiencing a crisis, it is safest to remove lethal means from the household entirely until the situation improves. For example:

- Store firearms with law enforcement (if allowed), or lock up firearms and put the key in a safe deposit box or give the key to a friend until the crisis has passed.
- Ask a family member to store medications safely and dispense safe quantities as necessary.

Some communities also focus means restriction efforts on local suicide “hotspots,” such as bridges. As part of strategic planning, states, tribes and communities should examine their data to identify what suicide means they should address.

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Action Steps

- Educate family members and others about ways to limit access to lethal means during a crisis.
- Train mental health professionals in lethal means counseling.
- Train nontraditional providers in lethal means counseling, for example, divorce and defense attorneys, probation/parole officers, and first responders.
- Educate the community about options for temporary storage of a firearm outside of the home during a crisis.
- Collaborate with others in your community to increase safety.
- Institute lethal means counseling policies in health and behavioral health care settings and train health care providers in these settings.
- Work collaboratively with gun retailers and gun owner groups on suicide prevention efforts.
- Distribute free or low-cost gun locks or gun safes.
- Ensure that bridges and high buildings have protective barriers.

Resources

Learn more by checking out the following websites:

- [Means Matter website](#)
Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health
- [Zero Suicide](#)
- [Maryland Safe Storage Map](#)