

Information in this brochure is based primarily on the Harvard Injury Research Center's Means Matter campaign resources.

Visit www.meansmatter.org for more information, including recommendations for families and FAQs about removing/storing firearms.

If you - or someone you know - are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-TALK (273-8255)

Get involved with suicide prevention in Virginia.

www.preventsuicideva.org

Or call the *Injury, Suicide, & Violence Prevention Program*

1-800-732-8333 (VA only)

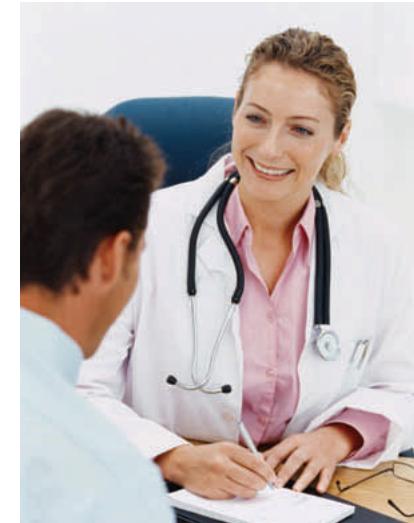
for additional information, training opportunities,

VDH VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Protecting You and Your Environment

www.vdh.virginia.gov

Suicide Prevention
Virginia Department of Health

Lethal Means Counseling for Clinicians



Source: Cirrus Health

An Important Step in Assessing and Managing Suicidal Risk

5 Minutes Can Save a Life

3-step intervention to use with parents and caretakers of suicidal individuals



Following the three steps below is an important intervention, as sensible as taking the car keys away from an intoxicated individual. It could mean the difference between life and death for an individual who is feeling suicidal.

1

Inform the parents or caretakers that the person of concern is at risk for suicide and why you think so.

2

Tell parents or caretakers they can reduce the risk of suicide by removing firearms and other lethal means from the house.

3

Educate parents and caretakers about different ways to dispose of, or at the very least, limit access to firearms and other lethal means. (see inside pages of this brochure for information and talking points regarding this topic)

The Importance of Lethal Means Counseling

While some suicides are planned and deliberate, many are a reaction to a short-term crisis. In these cases, increasing the difficulty of obtaining the means for suicide may give individuals greater opportunity to think through their options. Postponing the act may also afford a greater opportunity for others to intervene. Regardless of impulsivity, reducing the lethality of means available may result in lower rates of completed suicides.

A study of suicide attempt survivors found that for two-thirds, less than an hour elapsed between the decision to end their life and the attempt. For one of four, only 5 minutes elapsed.

"The presence of a gun in the home increases the chance that a suicide attempt will be fatal."

For some suicide attempters, the impulse is short-lived; in fact, studies show 90% or more of attempt survivors do not die by suicide. This means the lethal means chosen during that impulse may determine life or death.

Firearms are the most lethal means used in suicide - 85% of attempts with a firearm are fatal, a much higher rate than any other method. Studies also show those who die by suicide are twice as likely to have a gun at home than those who did not.

While firearm access can be a politically-charged topic, a non-controversial, "lethal means counseling" approach to reducing a suicidal person's access to firearms and other lethal means (poisons, medications, alcohol, etc.) can provide steps to take to keep patients safe.

Counseling Tips

Speaking with Client's Family and Loved Ones

(If the client is under 18; or for adults, if you have obtained releases to speak with family or others)

- Explain that you're concerned that their loved one is at risk for suicide.
- Ask if there are firearms at home and explain why you're asking (the presence of a gun increases the chance that a suicide attempt will be fatal).
- Ask **all** adults in the home. When clinicians speak with a parent, it is often the mother. However, she may not know whether her male partner has a firearm at home.
- Ask about **all** firearms. If there's one gun, there are usually more.
- Assess each relevant household (e.g., in a joint custody situation, ask about both homes).
- Advise that the safest option is not having firearms at home until the situation improves.

Speaking with the Adult Client

- Review the same information as above.
- Express your concerns about their safety and your wish to keep them safe.
- Ask them if you can enlist important family members or other concerned parties in keeping lethal means out of the home and providing other support.
- Help the client understand that risk sometimes escalates rapidly (e.g., right after a fight). Not having lethal means at hand reduces bad outcomes in volatile situations.
- In the removal of lethal means, enlist a support person to make the transfer if doing so would be risky for the client.

Continued on next panel

- Assess the client's compliance. Compliance is a good sign that they are trying to stay safe. Have they refused to remove guns (or, for example, has stockpiled medication and won't remove it)?
- Follow your agency's policies regarding taking more extreme steps such as contacting police and/or hospitalization if the person is in acute danger.

Assess suicidal risk on an ongoing basis; things can improve or deteriorate rapidly.

Removal of Lethal Means

FIREARMS

- Local law enforcement may be able to store the guns (or dispose of them).
- Sympathize with gun owners who find the option of living without a firearm at home, even temporarily, very difficult. Don't minimize the tough sacrifice, but be firm that the safest option is keeping guns out of a suicidal person's home.
- May be possible to store firearms at a trusted friend's or relative's until the situation improves.
- If removal is not an option, lock all firearms unloaded in a safe designed for firearms or in a tamper-proof, locked storage place. Lock ammunition separately or remove ammunition from the home until the situation improves. Ensure keys/ combinations aren't accessible to the one at risk.
- Hiding unlocked guns is not advised. Kids know their parent's hiding places!

Document in your notes that you have reviewed this information with the client and/or family.

MEDICATIONS



- Limit prescriptions of lethal medications (including antidepressants) to suicidal patients to a non-lethal quantity.
- Call the Poison Control Hotline if you need help determining a non-lethal quantity: 1-800-222-1222
- Advise clients and families to remove lethal doses from the home. Federal guidelines regarding medication disposal are available at WhiteHouseDrugPolicy.gov.
- Also advise clients and families to buy over the counter medication and fill drug prescriptions in small quantities.
- Advise families to store all medications and poisons in a secure place.

OTHER MEANS

- Advise families to monitor alcohol and drug use; which can increase impulsivity.
- Families may want to consider removing razor blades/knives, other sharp objects and poisons from a home until the situation improves.
- Taking away the keys to an automobile is another possible option.

Note: Most who kill themselves do so on their first attempt. Many never sought treatment for suicidal feelings. This underlines the importance of including suicide assessment with all clients.