



COUNSELING  
ON ACCESS TO  
**LETHAL MEANS**

## **Reducing Access to Lethal Means for Those at Risk for Suicide**

### **1. Why you are receiving this information**

Your service or family member has indicated that they have been thinking about suicide, have made a suicide attempt, or are struggling with mental health, substance misuse and/or life challenges. For people facing these issues, suicidal thoughts can come up quickly and unpredictably and can lead to suicide attempts. We thus recommend reducing their access to lethal means as an important part of keeping them SAFE.

### **2. What are Lethal Means?**

**Lethal Means are those that are MOST LIKELY to cause death when used by someone feeling suicidal.**

- Suicide **Attempts most frequently** involve **pills**; Suicide **Deaths most often** involve **firearms**.
- The difference is in the comparative **LETHALITY** of the methods.
- Most attempts happen at home, are decided on quickly, and involve readily available methods.
- Unlike most other methods, firearms do not allow for a change of mind or for rescue.

**Putting time and distance between a suicidal person and lethal means,  
especially firearms, may save a life.**

### **3. How to reduce access:**

#### **Firearms**

- Temporarily storing all guns away from the home is the most effective method. Asking a friend or relative to hold on to them is often the easiest way to accomplish this.
- Other offsite storage options include: gun shops, firing ranges, self-storage units, pawn shops or police departments. These may involve fees or background checks.
- In-home locking is not as safe. Kids often know where guns are stored and how to access them, even when adults think they don't.
- If removing firearms from the home is not possible, take steps to increase time and distance.
  - "Triple Safe Locking" at home is the next safest option: unload all firearms, lock them in a gun safe, lock ammunition separately or don't keep ammo at home for now. Trigger or cable locks can be added.
  - Change combinations or key locations.
  - Remove a key component of the firearms (e.g. the firing pin).
  - If the gun owner is the one at risk, lock all guns and give the key(s) to someone else

## Medications and Toxins

- Dispose of all expired/unneeded medicines, especially prescription pain pills and any drugs of abuse.
- Reduce clients' access to their meds by dispensing them one at a time or keeping only a few days' supply in their pill box.
- Prioritize locking up the following and seek specific guidance from a doctor or pharmacist:
  - ☐ Prescription pills, especially for pain
  - ☐ Over-the-counter pain pills
  - ☐ Over-the-counter sleeping pills
  - ☐ Use a medicine lock box if necessary
  - ☐ Also lock up toxic household cleaning products, pesticides, solvents, and other potential poisons.

**4. What else should we do?** Focus particularly on anything mentioned in suicide plans or means that pose particular risk for the individual due to personal interest or recent suicides in peers, the news, etc.

**Suffocation/Hanging** is a leading method of suicide death for those of all ages. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to remove access to all ligatures. If hanging is a concern, obvious means should be removed or made inaccessible. Beyond that, close supervision (physical and emotional) of the individual and other aspects of the Safety Plan should be emphasized.

**Cutting/Sharps** are frequently used for self-soothing but only infrequently results in suicide deaths. Reducing access to sharps (blades, knives, etc.) – particularly in private spaces - is indicated to prevent increasing or severe cutting behaviors or if they are an at-risk person's method of choice.

**Other Methods** should be addressed whenever they are indicated as risks for the individual. For example, if a person talks about driving off a nearby cliff, steps should be taken to prevent them from driving, especially in the vicinity of that location. Work with the individual on ways to reduce access as indicated.

**While reducing access to lethal means is effective for preventing suicide, it should only be viewed as part of an overall SAFETY PLAN**

For more information on reducing access to lethal means, visit the MEANS MATTER website

at [www.meansmatter.org](http://www.meansmatter.org)

**Help is available 24/7 by calling the Suicide Lifeline at:**

**988**