

Reducing Access to Firearms: A Suicide Prevention Guide for Military Leaders



Research shows that reducing access to firearms during periods of increased suicide risk reduces the likelihood of a suicide attempt.¹ Accordingly, health professionals and commanders who reasonably believe a service member is at risk of suicide or causing harm to others, are authorized to “ask the Service member to voluntarily store their privately owned firearms and ammunition for temporary safekeeping.”²



Firearms are the **most common method** of suicide in the military.³ Firearms drastically increase the lethality of suicide attempts.

Reducing access to firearms via **safe storage**:

- Is crucial for suicide prevention and general household safety.
- Makes it harder for a person in crisis to act on suicidal thoughts and allows them time to reach out for help.
- May decrease the likelihood of impulsive firearm use.



Safe storage practices for all service members

- Store firearms unloaded in locked gun safe.
- Store firearms and ammunition separately.
- Secure firearms with locking device (e.g., cable lock).
- Disassemble firearms.



Up to two thirds of service members may not use safe storage practices for firearms at home.⁴

If command-directed restriction of military-issued firearms is indicated:

- Avoid stigma, reduce barriers to care, and emphasize safety.
- Routine stressors, absent suicide risk indicators, should not be the basis for restriction.
- Engage in collaborative discussion with the service member and medical provider.
- Emphasize that restriction is non-punitive and temporary.

Recommendations to Manage Service Member Risk

■ **Consult With Providers Early:**

- Leverage mental health providers as consulting rather than emergency-only resources to reduce effects of stress and suicide behavior on readiness.
- In an emergency, engage mental health providers as early as possible.

■ **Know Your Service Members:**

- Front-line leaders should proactively engage with service members facing stressors that can lead to thoughts of suicide, including discussing how unit and command can assist, and promoting help-seeking.
- Service members who are experiencing serious life stressors and are at risk for suicide may benefit from command assistance with safely storing their firearms.

■ **Have the Conversation:**

- Ask service members at risk for suicide about their access to firearms, including plans to purchase.
- Prompt: “I know you’ve been struggling with _____. I care about what you’re going through. Sometimes people experience depression or thoughts of suicide during times like these. Do you want to store your handgun in the unit arms room until things resolve?”



Consult
with provider



Engage
with service member



Assist
as needed



Department of Defense employees who use this information are responsible for considering all applicable regulations and policies throughout the course of care, patient education, and all other related activities.

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Reducing Access to Personally Owned Firearms: Best Practices

Risk factors and warning signs for suicide⁵ warrant having a conversation with the service member about how the command can help support their safety. Although the presence of risk factors does not mean an individual will engage in suicidal behavior, warning signs are indicators that prompt action is needed. Reducing access to firearms is indicated for individuals exhibiting **serious warning signs**⁶:

- Recent psychiatric hospitalization or suicide attempt.
- Acute signs of distress such as hopelessness, agitation and impulsivity.
- Current legal/disciplinary or substance misuse.
- Inability to cope with financial, occupational or relationship problems.
- **Communicating suicidal thoughts verbally, in writing, or electronically.**
- **Researching or seeking access to lethal means.**
- **“Putting affairs in order” or other preparatory behaviors such as making a will or saying goodbyes.**
- **Hopelessness, withdrawal, or lacking reasons for living.**

Commanding officers and consulting health professionals should work to reduce access to personally owned firearms when they have a reasonable belief that a service member is at risk for harm to self or others:

- As a temporary and entirely voluntary option for the service member.
- Without command incentives or disincentives.
- Ending when the service member requests return of the firearm.
- In accordance with service-specific and DoD policies and procedures, including DoDI 6490.16.
- Including National Guard and reserve service members on active duty or actively drilling.

Resources



Military Crisis Line

800-273-8255 (press 1) or text 838255



VA Lethal Means Safety and Suicide Prevention

mirecc.va.gov/lethalmeanssafety/index.asp



National Shooting Sports Foundation Safety Resources

nssf.org/safety

✓ Do	✗ Don't
Promote use of gun locks for general household safety and risk reduction.	Enact blanket policies that require the disclosure of privately owned firearms.
Emphasize firearm safety. Store firearms in locked commercial safes or cases rather than in plain view, in nightstand, or under bed/pillow. Secure ammunition separately to decrease the potential for impulsive firearm use.	Enact firearms restriction without consulting with a health care professional.
Require registration with the appropriate base official for privately owned firearms stored on military installations (including base housing).	Reduce firearms access solely on the basis of a service member's life stressors without establishing risk status.
Provide space in unit arms rooms for potential short-term voluntary storage of privately owned firearms during periods of risk.	Order service members to turn over privately owned firearms.
Enlist trusted family members to help service members reduce access to firearms during high risk periods.	Attempt to confiscate privately owned firearms.
Ensure that weapons-restricted service members can continue to contribute meaningfully and remain integrated within their units.	Disclose information on firearm duty restrictions to anyone who does not have an absolute need to know.
As a last resort only, restrict a service member to the barracks or military installation to temporarily prevent access to privately owned and stored firearms. Consult the Staff Judge Advocate as needed.	Increase stigma by calling attention to a service member who has been placed on firearms restriction.

References:

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- ³Pruitt, L. D., Smolenski, D. J., Tucker, J., Issa, F., Chodacki, J. A., McGraw, K., & Kennedy, C. H. (2019). Department of Defense Suicide Event Report: Calendar year 2017 Annual Report (Publication No. F-C3EE053). Falls Church, VA: Defense Health Agency.
- ⁴Bryan, C. J., Bryan A. O., Anestis, M. D., Khzem, L. R., Harris, J. A., May, A. M., & Thomsen, C. (2019). Firearm availability and storage practices among military personnel who have thought about suicide. *JAMA Network Open*, 2(8), e199160.
- ⁵The Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide Work Group, Department of Veterans Affairs & Department of Defense. (2019). *VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Assessment and Management of Patients at Risk for Suicide. Version 2.0.*
- ⁶Bryan, C. J., Stone, S. L., & Rudd, M. D. (2011). A practical, evidence-based approach for means restriction counseling with suicidal patients. *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice*, 42, 339-346.