

The Basics of Firearms

When talking with firearms owners about reducing access to prevent suicide, it is useful to have some knowledge of firearms. This sheet contains basic information. There is a lot of additional information online. You may want to take an introductory firearms class (usually two hours with no shooting involved and often free) or a basic class (length and cost varies and usually includes supervised shooting experience).

Types of Firearms

There are two general types of firearms: handguns and long guns. Handguns, including revolvers and semi-automatic pistols, are held in a person's hand when fired. Long guns, including shotguns and rifles, are usually braced against the shoulder when firing.

Revolvers

- Revolvers are handguns in which the cartridges (ammunition) are manually inserted into a rotating cylinder. Most revolvers have five or six chambers within the rotating cylinder, which means they fire five or six shots before needing to be reloaded.

Semi-Automatic Pistols

- Since the 1980s, semi-automatic pistols have become more common than revolvers.
- A semi-automatic gets its name from its reloading feature: With every pull of the trigger, one cartridge is fired and ejected, then a new one is moved into the chamber, and the pistol is ready to fire again.
- When loading a pistol, cartridges are placed inside a magazine (ammunition storage and feeding device), and the magazine is inserted into the pistol (usually in the grip).

Rifles

- Rifles are used for accurately shooting objects that are far away.
- There are many kinds of rifles, including single-shot, pump-action, and semi-automatic.

Shotguns

- Shotguns are better for short-range use. They shoot a "spray" of shots instead of single bullets.
- There are many kinds of shotguns, including single-shot, semi-automatic, over and under, and double-barreled.

Locking Devices

Internal Locks

What it is: A lock that is built into a handgun. Once the lock is employed, the gun will not work. Some guns are equipped with an internal lock that is built into the firearm.

How it works: Internal locks work differently with each gun manufacturer. Generally, a small key is inserted into a keyhole on the gun and turned to lock the hammer and engage the lock. If the hammer is locked or down when the trigger is pulled, nothing will happen.

Features: Varies by type and model

Price: Included in the price of the gun

Advantages:

- Nothing additional needs to be bought.
- The lock is designed specifically for the model.

Disadvantages:

- Depending on the model, it can be difficult or impossible to tell from the outside whether the lock is engaged.
- Internal locks can be removed, and it may be unclear from the outside whether the lock is still intact.

Trigger Locks

What it is: A two-piece lock that fits over the trigger guard. Trigger locks cover the trigger mechanism on either side of the gun with two steel or plastic blocks that rest on the trigger guard and lock together. Trigger locks are best suited for unloaded guns.

How it works: A rigid cylinder fits behind the trigger so that the trigger cannot be pulled. A push-button keypad, combination, or key opens the lock.

Features: Some models have battery-operated locks, lighted keypads, and anti-tamper alarms.

Price: Free to \$35+

Advantages:

- Inexpensive
- Widely available
- Quick access (keypad models)

Disadvantages:

- Most of these locks are not that difficult to remove.
- They may break easily.
- If the gun is loaded, putting on or taking off the trigger lock can cause the gun to fire.

Cable Locks

What it is: A device that blocks the chamber to prevent a cartridge from being fired.

How it works: Chamber locks are inserted in or through the magazine well or chamber, or are inserted through the gun barrel and chamber to block a cartridge from moving into position. A combination or key opens the lock.

Features: Metal cylinders, vinyl-covered wire cables, or other designs. Locks may be universal (fit any gun) or may only fit certain revolver or pistol models. Some models have anti-tamper alarms.

Price: Free to \$20+

Advantages:

- Long cables may be threaded through several guns.
- Inexpensive.

- Often more versatile than trigger locks (i.e., fits a wider variety of guns).

Disadvantages:

- Thin cables can be cut.

Lock Box

What it is: A small safe designed to store one or two handguns.

How it works: The handgun is locked inside the box. A push-button, combination, digital, or biometric keypad, or key opens the lock.

Features: Most models have holes in the bottom to allow permanent mounting. Some have lighted locks for access in the dark. Most have padded interiors.

Price: \$40 to \$200+

Advantages:

- Quick access if the lock is push-button or digital
- Difficult to steal if permanently mounted
- May allow storage for more than one handgun
- Keeps guns out of sight

Disadvantages:

- Costs more than trigger locks and cable locks

Gun Safe or Vault

What it is: A secure metal locking container that is designed to store both long guns and handguns. It is either free-standing (a safe) or built into the building (a vault) and comes in a variety of sizes.

How it works: The firearms are locked inside it. A push-button, combination, digital, or biometric keypad opens the lock.

Features: Varies by type and model

Price: \$100 to \$2,000+

Advantages:

- Difficult to steal
- Allows storage of numerous long guns and handguns
- Usually fire resistant
- Keeps guns and valuables out of sight

Disadvantages:

- Costs more than other options
- Heavy and difficult to move