

Planning can help gun owners age safely

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The Harborview Injury Prevention & Research Center (HIPRC) has created a [new online resource](#) to help older adults with cognitive impairment draw up a plan for safekeeping of firearms.

Older adults with [dementia](#) and other cognitive conditions are at

increased risk of [unintentional injury](#) and suicide by firearm, says Laura Prater, an acting assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

"A lot of people in this country enjoy using [firearms](#). They value them (and) they use them to create a social connection with their peers," she said. "Being a responsible firearm owner means storing your firearms safely so that you, your loved ones and anyone visiting your home are safe."

Nearly 40% of adults in Washington state age 65 and older live with a firearm in the home, comprising about 410,000 individuals, according to a study published in 2019 by the center's researchers. Of these adults, only about 1 in 3 reported that they stored all their firearms locked and unloaded, and 1 in 4 said they kept at least one firearm in the home loaded and unlocked.

At HIPRC, the Firearm Injury & Policy Research team has created a website focused on firearm safety for older adults with early cognitive changes. It provides information about dementia, early warning signs of cognitive impairment, and links to guidance on how to start the conversation about firearm safety. There's also information about safe firearm storage and public policies aimed at preventing firearm injuries.

Firearm safety is particularly important among older adults because depression and cognitive impairment are common in this population, Prater said. The conditions increase risk for unintentional injury and [suicide](#). Nationally, 91% of firearm deaths among older adults are caused by self-inflicted wounds.

It is possible to reduce firearm risk by openly discussing safety with the older adult and drawing up a plan for guns' safe management, Prater said. Planning can start early, ideally before the onset of cognitive

impairment.

More information: Erin R. Morgan et al, Household Firearm Ownership and Storage, Suicide Risk Factors, and Memory Loss Among Older Adults: Results From a Statewide Survey, *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.7326/M18-3698](https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-3698)

Provided by University of Washington

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