

Health care providers rarely ask patients about access to firearms, finds research

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Researchers surveyed 3,510 English-speaking adults living in five states as part of a Rutgers study

Health care providers rarely ask patients if they have access to firearms in their home—a question that could diminish the risk of serious injury or [death](#) and encourage conversations about secure firearm storage,

according to a Rutgers study.

However, according to a study in *Preventive Medicine*, led by the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers, [health](#) care providers rarely screen their patients for firearm access.

Researchers surveyed 3,510 English-speaking adults in five states: Colorado, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey and Texas, asking if a health care provider had ever asked them whether they have access to firearms.

They found that 17.1 percent of participants had been asked by a health care provider about firearm access. This number was largely consistent across groups, with 20.1 percent of those with children 17 years old or younger, 25.5 percent of those with a history of mental health treatment and 21.4 percent of firearm owners ever having been screened for firearm access.

"Although we know that firearm access increases the risk for fatal injury for everyone in the home, health care providers are rarely asking about firearm access," said Allison Bond, a doctoral student at the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center and the lead author of the study.

"In order to prevent these injuries and deaths, healthcare providers need consider adding screening for firearm access into [standard practice](#) so that they are better positioned to then provide resources on secure firearm storage to the families that would most benefit from that information."

Researchers also examined which factors were associated with greater odds of having been screened by a [health care provider](#) for firearm access.

They found that individuals with a lifetime history of suicidal thoughts, men, those who identified as white, parents with children 17 years old or younger living in the home, those with a history of mental health treatment and firearm owners were more likely to have been screened.

Among firearm owners, those with children in the home ages 17 or younger and those with a history of mental health treatment were more likely to have been screened. Even among groups with greater odds of having been screened, the majority of individuals had never been asked about firearm access.

"Given these results, it appears that screening is more likely among certain health care providers, like pediatricians and mental health care providers," said Michael Anestis, executive director of the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center, an associate professor in the Rutgers School of Public Health and senior author of the study. "It may also be that health care providers are often relying upon their sense of who is most likely to own a firearm when making a decision whether or not to ask."

"The problem with that, however, is that the demographics of firearm ownership have changed in the past few years and many of those at greatest risk for firearm injury or death never present in specialized mental health care settings," said Anestis. "We need [health care providers](#) to broaden their vision of the role of [firearm](#) access to ensure they can help the greatest number of people."

More information: Allison E. Bond et al, Determining who healthcare providers screen for firearm access in the United States, *Preventive Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2023.107476](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2023.107476)

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