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Safety and the Right to Bear Arms

Even before a dementia diagnosis is made, families usually notice problems in functioning that could present potential safety risks to the person with dementia. Common concerns revolve around driving, use of the stove, being home alone and wandering or getting lost.

The reasons for these concerns are warranted. As dementia progresses the individual affected will experience a decline in judgment skills, memory, perception and reasoning that compromises their ability to act safely in a variety of situations.

One area that is often overlooked from the beginning is the possession and use of firearms. Gun owners usually feel that firearms provide protection, so many may not even consider the potential risks. Both cleaning and operating guns are skills that require specific attention to safety.

Most people who own guns



are trained at some point in safe handling techniques. However as dementia progresses this information and training can fade away because of cognitive decline.









Of additional concern, many people who suffer from dementia also face changes in personality and emotion. Depression is common among those with dementia and can increase the risk of suicide, especially if there is access to a means, like a firearm. Dementia also affects one's ability to control emotions, which can result in bursts of emotion that may not be logical.

As with all of the potential safety risks that come with dementia, one never knows when risk will become real danger. Addressing and discussing safety risks early on in the disease process is the best option. This allows for the person with dementia to participate in the decision. So often however, families do not have conversations about these risks early on, or a diagnosis is much later. This means that more forceful measures must be taken to ensure safety.

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Caregiver Tips

Important documents to keep on hand in case of emergency

-  Doctors' names and contact information
-  A list of current medications, dosages and medical conditions
-  Phone numbers and addresses of local police and fire departments, hospitals and poison control
-  List of food or drug allergies
-  Copies of legal papers (will, powers of attorney, do not resuscitate orders etc.)
-  Names and contact information of friends and family members to call in case of emergency
-  Insurance policy information.
-  Completed Vial of Life on refrigerator



If a conversation is not possible due to progression of the disease, or lack of good judgment, then it is important that family members take action to address the concern.

Below are some tips for dealing with firearms in the home.

- ◆ The best option is the removal of the weapon from the home BEFORE there is a major concern.
- ◆ All guns in the home should be stored separately from ammunition in a secured and locked case or firearm vault.
- ◆ The person with disease should not have unsupervised access to firearms.
- ◆ If there are guns in the home, any adult in the home should make it a priority to learn proper and safe handling of guns. Women are often afraid to touch their husband's guns even just to remove them because they are unfamiliar.
- ◆ Consider having an adult child, neighbor or friend "borrow" or "store" the guns permanently. There is special paperwork to be completed to legally transfer gun ownership which a licensed dealer can assist you with.
- ◆ Have the guns leave the house for "professional cleaning."
- ◆ Have the trigger mechanism disabled professionally. Be aware however, that this could still present risk if Law Enforcement ever become involved as they must act with the belief that the gun is operational.
- ◆ Go through a licensed firearm dealer to place the guns on consignment.
- ◆ Contact local Law Enforcement or the Sheriff's Department if afraid to handle the gun. The police will come out and retrieve the gun and destroy it. They may want to see a statement of diagnosis from a physician.
- ◆ If you have no other option, take the firearm to the Sheriff's Department. Bring the unloaded gun in the trunk of the vehicle. Leave the gun in the trunk and go inside the station and tell the front desk that you have a firearm you would like to turn in for destruction due to a loved one having dementia. They also may want a statement of diagnosis. An officer will escort you to the vehicle to retrieve the firearm and ammunition.

*Written by Jessica Mezzapesa, Care Specialist
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Helpful Resources:

Alzheimer's Association, Safety At Home
alz.org/national/documents/brochure_homesafety.pdf

Six out of 10 people with Alzheimer's will wander

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