

Five things you need to know about **guns and suicide**

Guns are the most lethal suicide method. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that 17% of all suicides are completed using a gun, these types of suicide attempts are almost always fatal and also the most preventable.

As 10 October is World Mental Health Day, October has been declared Mental Health Awareness Month by the Department of Health to raise awareness about mental health and to support and reduce the discrimination that people with mental illness may experience. The month is also used to highlight interventions to help those living with a mental illness, and to prevent the most fatal result of a mental illness – suicide.

There are many factors that push someone to suicide. Research shows that while understanding **WHY** people attempt suicide is important, **HOW** people attempt suicide is also important. The WHO's most recent publication on suicide prevention, *Preventing suicide: A global imperative*, recognises the increased risk guns pose. It notes that, "An effective strategy for preventing suicides and suicide attempts is to restrict access to the most common means...including firearms."

Here are five things to know about guns and suicide, points that can save a life:

1. Households with guns have a higher risk of gun-related suicide

The means or weapon used to commit suicide depends on availability. Research shows a close correlation between households owning guns and gun-related suicide. A gun in the home increases the risk of a gun-related suicide irrespective of whether anyone living in the home has been diagnosed with a mental illness or not.

2. Gun are a leading cause of suicide in South Africa

Data show that guns are the third leading cause of suicide in South Africa. Suicide with a gun is quick and irreversible, once the trigger is pulled, death usually follows within minutes. Attempters who use other methods have some time to reconsider mid-attempt and summon help or be rescued, even suicide attempters who use hanging can stop mid-attempt.

3. Guns are the most lethal method of suicide

An analysis of the success rates of different suicide methods in the United States shows that guns are by far the most lethal method for suicide: While 85% of all suicide attempts with a gun are fatal, this percentage drops to 69% for hanging and 31% for jumping from a height.

4. Men are more at risk of suicide by gunshot

Global research shows that men are more at risk of suicide by gunshot, with shots usually aimed at the head (mouth, temple, forehead) or chest; the research also shows that gun suicides most frequently take place at home.

5. Stronger gun laws reduce access, leading to fewer gun-related suicides

Countries with low gun ownership levels have low levels of gun-related suicide, while countries with high levels of gun ownership have high rates of gun-related suicide. Studies also show a link between the type of gun available and its use in suicide: In countries where handguns are more common, these will be the weapon of choice; while countries with more long guns (rifles and shotguns) available will see more suicides involving these weapons.

South Africa's own experience shows that reducing access to guns reduces their use in suicides: In the country's suicide capital, Pretoria, hanging replaced gun-related suicide between 2007 and 2010; with four forensic medicine researchers from the University of Pretoria arguing in the South African Medical Journal that the introduction of the Firearms Control Act (2000), which clamped down on gun ownership, "has positively impacted on the use of such weapons in committing suicide."

Gun-related suicides can be prevented

Preventing someone from dying by suicide is not simple, but research into suicide prevention shows that the means matter, and that gun-related suicide is preventable. If you know someone who should not have a gun and for more information on removing a gun from the home [Take Action](#) to save a life.

If you know someone who is suicidal and needs help, contact the South African Depression and Anxiety Group's suicide crisis helpline: 0800 567 567

