Firearm Safety

In many households throughout the country, someone owns at least one firearm or other type of weapon. In the vast majority of situations, this has posed no problem for responsible gun owners or those who live with them. There are two circumstances, however, that tend to pose a significant risk when someone at home lives with a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease or another dementia.

1. As the disease progresses for the person with the diagnosis, there are changes in perception that may cause the person to have trouble recognizing those they have known for years. There have been situations in which family members are misperceived as intruders, and when guns are available, the results can be disastrous.

2. In addition, though, whether the family member is injured directly or not by the person with dementia, anyone attempting to intervene will not be sure whether the gun is loaded. If the person has access to a firearm and is carrying one, loaded or not, others may observe the person with dementia carrying a weapon and feel the need to respond in some way. Police officers who are trained to deal with these situations must err on the side of caution and assume that the gun is loaded, doing what is necessary to protect themselves and others.

Failing to take precautions can have terrible consequences. It’s important to consider the following to avoid a disaster.

1. Past experience with guns tells nothing about the person’s current ability to handle that same firearm.

   The safe use of firearms requires complex cognitive abilities and quick decision-making skills that may be compromised due to the progression of the disease. Take steps to ensure gun safety before they seem necessary.

2. Locking or disabling a gun is not enough.

   People with dementia sometimes misperceive danger, and may do whatever seems necessary to protect themselves even if no real threat exists. These actions can include breaking into gun cabinets, finding ammunition and loading guns, or believing and acting as if they are holding loaded weapons. Preventing a gun from firing does not prevent the person with the disease or others from being harmed.

3. Guns will need to be removed from the home to fully protect the family from an accident.

   Family members sometimes attempt to hide their firearms or ammunition to prevent the person with dementia from having access to them. They may lock the guns in an
attic or in the trunk of a car, or keep ammunition outside of the home. These solutions can be good first steps. But they do not endure that the person will not find the gun and appear to be holding a loaded weapon, thereby causing those around the person to react accordingly. Keep in mind that unloaded guns or ammunition alone may also be dangerous if dropped or struck by anyone involved.

It’s critical that there be an open discussion among all family members about all weapons in the home, including antiques, collections, war souvenirs, hunting equipment and decorative pieces. Just as legal, financial, care and driving plans are best made early in the disease process, plans will need to be made for what to do with firearms or other weapons both immediately and when the person is no longer capable of handling them safely. For many who have a history of using firearms or other weapons as part of their work or recreation, these conversations can be difficult, as they may threaten key aspects of the person’s identity. The person may be very tied to their weapons, refusing to part with them. But alternate plans will need to be made for the storage, inheritance or disposal of weapons when someone has Alzheimer’s disease or a related dementia in order to ensure everyone’s safety.

Here are some tips that can help with the discussion:

1. Begin with a discussion of who might inherit various pieces in the future, and consider the need for future planning for increasing needs as the person’s disease progresses. This can be a way to move to a discussion of safety at home when the person is no longer able to take responsibility for keeping his or her firearms in good working order, etc. It may be possible to talk about providing the inherited pieces to the recipient soon, so that person can provide for upkeep, use the weapon, etc.

2. Discuss financial needs for future care, and think about selling some valuable items at home that are no longer used to help pay for care. A collection of firearms may be considered as part of this discussion. You may want to visit a dealer together who can handle the sale.

3. Discuss donating an antique collection so that others can learn about and appreciate them.

4. Include a trusted authority figure who is knowledgeable about the critical safety issues. Get agreement ahead of time from everyone involved that if that person says that the removal of the weapons from the home must be done as part of keeping family members safe, this will be done. Consider inviting authorities, hunting buddies, etc., to take part in the conversation with the family.

5. If there is no consent to removing the weapons when the time comes, this may need to be done against the person’s wishes while the person is out of the house for an extended period of time. Take care to remove reminders of the weapons, including cases, ammunition, racks and holsters.
6. Be sure that the person is not alone for the first few days after the firearms have been removed from the house, to maximize safety and comfort. Avoid television or magazine reminders of weapons.

7. Address any anger or other feelings that the person may have about the change by acknowledging the feelings, and then focusing on an activity to do together.