TALKING ABOUT GUNS AND GUN VIOLENCE

A REFERENCE FOR PHYSICIANS

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

The purpose of this reference work is to give medical caregivers the information that will allow them to feel more comfortable when they find themselves in a clinical discussion with someone who owns or is interested in owning and using guns.

Talking to a parent about making sure their child uses a seatbelt is easy because we all drive cars. Talking to an adult about a proper diet is also easy because we are all tempted to chomp down some potato chips from time to time.

Guns are different. If you do not own a gun, you might feel reluctant to discuss gun violence with a gun owner because your lack of knowledge and experience in this area could make it difficult for you to understand or validate what you are being told.

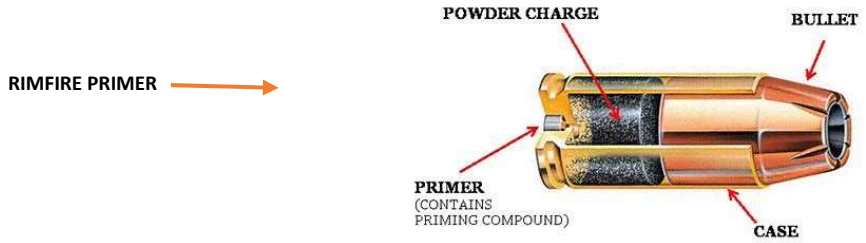
This text is not a primer on medical education. It does not present a counseling narrative which meets the medical requirements for discussing any medical issue in or outside of a clinical setting. It is to be used as a reference work to help you better understand what someone might say to you about their guns.

WHAT IS A GUN?

A gun is a mechanical device which propels a solid object, called a bullet, in the direction in which the gun is pointed. The bullet, which usually weighs between one-third and half an ounce and is fabricated out of lead or alloys, leaves the barrel as fast as a rocket breaks away from Earth's gravity and begins to travel the 238,855 miles to the Moon.

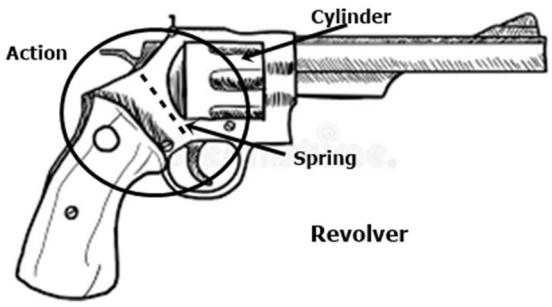
When a solid object like a bullet hits a human body at such a high speed, it will cause serious, often life-threatening damage.[1] Not only will the bullet usually penetrate the skin, but it will often move throughout the body, destroying muscle, bone, tissue, whatever it hits as it advances through the human frame.[2]

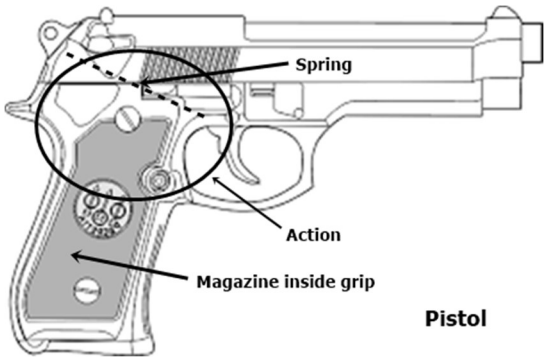
In order for a mechanical device to function as a gun, the rear of the ammunition (the 'primer') is struck hard enough to create a spark which ignites the propellant (the 'powder charge') which in turn releases gas inside the case, creating enough pressure to propel the bullet towards the target:



The hammer is what hits the rear of the ammunition, the trigger is what cocks the hammer and then drops it onto the ammunition with enough force to create the spark which ignites the powder.
These two parts, hammer, and trigger are connected by a spring or multiple springs. The hammer, trigger and springs are called the gun's 'action.' Without an action, a gun cannot function as a gun.

A gun will also be fitted with parts designed to hold ammunition for the gun. These parts can be found either inside or outside the gun's frame, such as a cylinder holding ammunition for a revolver or a magazine holding ammunition for a pistol.





Pistol

A gun may also be mounted with glass optics or fixed, metal sights to help aim the gun accurately. Many guns are now fitted with laser beams which also help to aim the gun.

Handguns are built with steel or polymer frames which contain the movable parts. The frame is usually a single piece with a grip for holding the gun with one hand and a slide which holds the barrel.

Long guns are built with wood or polymer stocks which contain the moveable parts and the barrel. The rear of the stock is placed against the shoulder for stability and ease of fire.

Revolvers and pistols are referred to as 'handguns.' Rifles and shotguns are referred to as 'long guns.' These designations usually are based on licensing definitions because many states have different age and legal requirements for purchasing or owning handguns, as opposed to long guns.

Every gun sold in the United States must have a unique serial number that is printed or stamped onto the outside of the gun. There is no federal law preventing individuals from making their own guns, and such guns do not require a unique serial number. The requisite parts required to assemble a gun can be easily purchased at gun shows or online. Such guns are often referred to as 'ghost guns' and are not legally transferable to anyone else.

WHAT ARE GUNS DESIGNED TO DO?

Guns are designed to be used for three purposes:

A. Competitive or informal shooting, the latter called 'plinking.'
B. Hunting.
C. Tactical - law enforcement or military applications.

A. Competitive or plinking guns.

The word 'plinking' is simply slang for describing any kind of informal shooting, such as aiming at an old can or maybe a plastic container filled with water which will then burst when the container is struck by a shell.

The 22-caliber, or rimfire caliber, is favored for competition and plinking because the ammunition is very accurate and creates little recoil when the gun is fired. The term 'rimfire' refers to the location of the primer, which is inside the rim of the shell rather than in the middle of the shell as pictured on Page 4.

The lack of recoil makes it easy to shoot a target gun many times without losing aim or concentration due to muscle fatigue. Rimfire ammunition is also much cheaper than centerfire ammunition used in hunting or tactical guns.

Competition/plinking guns can be used to commit gun violence, but the small size of the cartridge means that the injury will probably not be severe unless the shooter hits a lethal spot. Moreover, a rimfire bullet's small diameter means that the penetration will not necessarily cause enough initial bleeding to produce an immediate, life-ending threat.

Since guns that are shot competitively require very accurate aim, whether they are rifles or handguns they usually require a long barrel so as to give the shooter a clearer target picture between the front and rear sights, or to mount a scope. Generally speaking, competitive rifles have a barrel of at least 22" in length, competitive handguns are fitted with barrels at least 6" in length.

B. Hunting Guns.

Hunting guns are designed to be used either for game animals or for birds. Most game animals are hunted with centerfire rifles or shotguns, while shotguns are used for hunting birds. Most hunting rifles and shotguns have an ammunition capacity of five or six rounds, and sometimes require a manual reloading process after every firing of the gun.

Most hunting rifle calibers are 30-caliber or larger; the word 'caliber' refers to the diameter of the bullet at its base, expressed in fractions of an inch. Thus, a 30-caliber bullet is .30 of an inch.

Shotgun calibers are expressed in gauges, which reflects the number of individual lead or steel pellets packed into each piece of ammunition adding up to one pound. Hence, a 12-gauge round has fewer pellets than a 20-gauge, but the 12-gauge pellets are also larger.

Hunting rifle ammunition will often travel 600-800 yards at high speeds, shotguns have an effective range of one hundred yards or less. On the other hand, since a round of shot contains multiple solid pellets, shotguns can be extremely lethal if fired at close range.

Like competitive guns, hunting guns also require long barrels for better sight perspective or mounting scopes. Generally speaking, such guns are fitted with barrels that are 22" or longer. Like competitive/plinking guns, this design factor also limits the concealability of such guns.

C. Tactical Guns

A tactical gun is designed for use by the military, armed law-enforcement, or both, even if it is made available for commercial sale. When a tactical gun is sold on the commercial market, it is referred to as a 'self-defense' gun.

The specific design and functional features used in tactical guns are described in Appendix I. The United States is the only country in the entire world which does not restrict commercial sales of tactical guns only to law enforcement or military troops.

Tactical guns, particularly tactical handguns, account for at least 95% of the intentional gun injuries committed each year.[3] This percentage includes more than 20,000 suicides committed each year with guns, which often involve the use of non-tactical guns.

When someone states that they own or desire to own a 'self-defense' gun, they are saying that the gun is a tactical gun which is designed only for the purpose of committing an act of gun violence. Gun violence is what happens when someone consciously decides to harm themselves or someone else with a gun.

TALKING ABOUT GUNS.

In order for someone to commit an act of gun violence, an individual must accomplish eight separate tasks. This process may happen in a brief period of time or may occur over a number of years. Unless all eight tasks are completed by someone, gun violence cannot occur.

The tasks are:

1. Interested in acquiring or using a gun.
2. Acquires a gun.
3. Acquires ammunition for the gun.
4. Loads the gun.
5. Puts the gun where he/she can easily pick it up.
6. Picks up the gun.
7. Points the gun at himself or someone else.
8. Fires the gun.

Obviously, an intervention prior to accomplishing Task #1 will be the most effective, pro-active method to reduce gun violence. This is why continuing the dialog with individuals who indicate there is no gun present in their environment is as important as continuing the dialog with someone who states that they have access to a gun.

If someone indicates that they are interested in acquiring a gun, or if a gun is present and available for use (tasks #1 and #2), you should then ask the individual to describe the type of gun that they either can use or are thinking about acquiring.

By asking the individual to talk about the gun, you are making it clear that you are interested in engaging in a dialog about guns, not just making a judgement about whether a gun is present and how it will be used. Engaging in such a dialog overcomes the natural tendency of actual or potential gun owners to feel defensive about gun ownership when discussions of gun risk arise.[4]

By initiating a discussion about the type(s) of gun(s) being considered for purchase/use, you can also make an important determination about the level and immediacy of risk. Different types of guns present different levels of risk, depending on how they are designed and how they are used (see Appendix I.)

Focusing on the gun also relieves the caregiver of having to engage in a discussion about 2nd-Amendment 'rights.' The laws defining gun ownership and gun use, particularly the 2nd Amendment, are covered in Appendix II.

TALKING ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE.

Research indicates that most individuals who commit gun violence show an interest in guns in their early teens.[5] At the ages 12-13, most of these adolescents are considering Task #1 in the process which leads to gun violence. By age 16, they have often initiated and perhaps accomplished Task #2.

Talking to adolescents about risky behavior is challenging because such individuals are not particularly risk-averse during their adolescent years.[6] When an adolescent is asked to explain their interest in gun ownership or gun use, they will probably respond by stating that guns are 'cool,' or gun ownership is 'something I want to do,' or some other non-explicative response. They may also entirely deny any interest in guns.

Gun owners, both adolescents and adults, may also justify gun access because they believe a gun will protect them from harm. This view often reflects the narrative employed by the gun industry to promote product sales.

If the gun is being used for hunting or sport, particularly if it is a rifle or a shotgun, the dialog should focus more on accidental injuries because most of these types of guns are not often used in intentional shooting events.

Tactical guns have become increasingly popular and are invariably used in mass shooting rampages like Columbine or Sandy Hook, as well as in the more than 225 random acts of gun violence (fatal and non-fatal assaults) which occur every day. Individuals who indicate ownership of tactical guns or an interest in acquiring a tactical gun, should be informed that such weapons create the highest degree of risk. They should also be informed that access to any gun, regardless of type, creates medical risk.[7]

If the individual states their desire to gain or maintain access to a tactical gun, or any gun, you should always promote a mitigating strategy (ex. safe storage) while making it clear that no strategy will eliminate the risk of gun violence other than getting rid of the gun(s).

<u>Safe Storage Options.</u>

There are two options for safe storage of guns which can be discussed if the gun owner is willing to accept the risks of gun access in the home:

1. A safe or other secure storage device which can only be opened by designated individuals who are allowed access to the guns.
2. A tamper-proof device which attaches to the gun and renders it inoperable, such as a trigger lock or a breech block.

Neither safe storage option renders the home completely free of the risk from guns. If a gun safe is operated with a combination or a key, an unauthorized person may either learn the combination or find the key. Most trigger locks and other external locking devices can be easily overcome, and YouTube contains many videos demonstrating how nullifying a locking device can be accomplished quickly without requiring special tools.

Gun safes and other safe-storage devices can be purchased at a gun shop or at many chain stores which stock home tools and furnishings, such as Walmart, Home Depot and Tractor Supply outlets. Many safes now feature electronic opening, as opposed to manual opening devices like a combination dial or a key. Electronic opening devices are just as secure as manual devices, except that batteries may fail without warning, so it is advisable to always have additional batteries available or a charging device.

A special warning should be given to gun owners who believe they can reduce gun risk by hiding their guns without locking them u
or locking them away. School-age children, as well as adults with social access to the home will quickly and easily find those guns.

Gun Safes

The most secure storage device is a standalone safe which is usually 60 inches high and 36 inches wide. Such units cost between $1,000 and $1,500, depending on whether they are lined for protection from fire, and other features. States that require storage devices often reduce or eliminate sales tax on such units.

The safes which hold only handguns can be purchased for $50 and can be placed inside a closet or in some other location which doesn't require the space used by a large, standalone safe. These safes (such as the one pictured above) are often opened with an electric combination but such devices also have batteries that wear out without prior warning.

Gun Locks

A trigger lock disables the trigger, thus rendering the gun inoperable. Federal law requires that every new gun include a lock, but locks are not required for used guns, except in certain states. Unless a state has passed a Child Access prevention (CAP) law, trigger locks or other locking devices are also not required when a gun is sold or transferred privately.

Cable locks are wrapped around the firing mechanism or breech of a gun and render the gun inoperable. They can be fitted easily on both handguns and long guns. Such locks cost $5 and are often available at no cost at local law enforcement agencies.

APPENDIX I. MEASURING GUN LETHALITY.

All guns are lethal. Some guns, however, are more lethal than others. Lethality is measured by:

1. The size and speed of the ammunition for which a particular gun is designed.
2. The ease and speed with which the gun can be loaded, aimed, and fired.
3. The degree to which a gun can be concealed and carried into a location where it will be used to injure others.

Guns designed for hunting and sport are lethal. However, they are not designed to be aimed and fired quickly, nor are they designed to be carried on the person in a concealed fashion. The following types of guns are designed for hunting and sport:

1. Bolt-action rifles.
2. Lever-action rifles.
3. Pump-action rifles and shotguns.
4. Self-loading rifles (manually reloaded after every shot.)
5. Self-loading shotguns (manually reloaded after every shot.)
6. Semi-auto rifles and shotguns with top-loading magazine.
7. Pistols and revolvers with target-length barrels.

The following types of gun are designed as tactical guns:

1. Semi-auto rifles, shotguns, or handguns with bottom-loading magazines.
2. Shotguns with barrels of less than 20" in length.
3. Concealable handguns (barrel length of less than 4".)

<u>Automatic versus Semi-automatic guns</u>.

The Federal Government and most state governments make a very clear distinction between full-auto and semi-auto guns in terms of licensing and ownership. Full-auto guns, often referred to as 'machine guns,' require one pull of the trigger for all of the ammunition in the gun or in a magazine attached to the gun to be discharged. Semi-automatic guns require the trigger to be pulled for every round that is fired.

Full-auto and semi-automatic guns, on the other hand, do not require that the shooter manually reload the gun after each round has been discharged, which is why full-auto and semi-automatic guns are usually considered to be tactical guns, as opposed to hunting guns usually require a manual reloading of fresh ammunition after each discharge of the gun.

Licensing for full-auto weapons is allowed, but it is a lengthy and expensive process which usually requires multiple background checks both by federal and local authorities. Semi-automatic guns, even if they are tactical guns, only require a standard background check and the licensing process, if there is a process, is quickly and easily completed, assuming that the buyer meets the legal qualifications for owning any gun.

APPENDIX II. THE 2ND AMENDMENT.

The text of the Second Amendment reads in full: **"A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."**

The 2nd Amendment does not define gun 'rights.' You are not infringing on anyone's gun 'rights' by talking to them about guns or any issue related to guns. In 2017, the 11th Circuit Federal Court overturned a Florida law that sought to criminalize physicians who counseled patients about guns.

Constitutional 'rights' are defined by laws. The Federal Government has passed four laws that regulate the commerce and ownership of guns. These laws were passed in 1934, 1938, 1968 and 1994. The laws are described and reproduced on the ATF website.[8]

The 2nd Amendment was the subject of a ruling in 2008. The ruling found that the 2nd Amendment gave Constitutional protection to keeping a handgun in the home. It did not grant Constitutional protection to either long gun ownership or carrying any kind of gun outside of the home.

NOTES.

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3. SSRN: Understanding Guns and Gun Violence by Michael Weisser :: SSRN.
4. R. Pallin, et. al., "Preventing Firearm Death and Injury," Annals of Internal Medicine (June 4, 2019) Preventing Firearm-Related Death and Injury | Annals of Internal Medicine (acpjournals.org).
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7. A. Kellerman, F. Rivara, et. al., "Suicide in the Home in Relation to Gun Ownership," New England Journal of Medicine, 327 (August 13, 1992), 467-72; A. Kellerman, F. Rivara, et. al., "Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home," New England Journal of Medicine, 329 (October 7, 1993) 1084-91.
8. Laws on Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives | Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (atf.gov).

GLOSSARY.

Action – Springs which connect trigger to hammer in handguns.

Breech – Rear of the barrel where ammunition rests before it is fired.

Bullet – Lead or alloy object which is shot out of barrel.

Caliber – Diameter of centerfire ammunition.

Case – Aluminum or brass object which holds powder, primer, and bullet.

Centerfire – Ammunition in which the primer is located at the rear center of the case.

Cylinder – Fixed revolver part which revolves to reload the gun.

Frame – Location within a handgun of the action.

Gauge – Measurement of shotgun ammunition based on number of pellets.

Handgun part which drops on primer which ignites powder.

Hand gun – Any firearm with a barrel length of less than 16 inches

Long gun – Any firearm with a barrel length of 16 inches or longer (some variation in certain states.)

Magazine – External part which attaches to handguns and rifles and holds the ammunition.

Primer – Flammable chemicals which ignite when struck and fire the ammunition.

Propellant – Powder inside case whose ignition by primer creates gas pressures which fire the round.

Rifle – Long gun which fires rimfire or centerfire ammunition.

Rimfire – Ammunition where primer is located inside the case rim.

Round – Another word for ammunition.

Semi-auto – A firearm which fires a round, ejects the empty shell, and loads a fresh round with one trigger pull.

Shotgun – Long gun which fires ammunition called shotshell, which are small lead or alloy balls rather than a solid bullet.

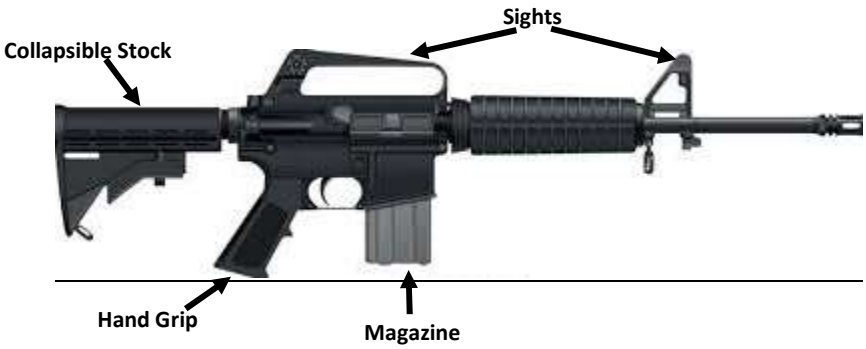
Slide – In pistols the slide is above the barrel and slides back and forth to eject a fired case and load a new round. In some long guns the slide is underneath the barrel and is manually moved to eject and reload the ammunition.

Stock – Rear part of a long gun which rests against the shooter's shoulder.

Trigger – Fitted part of a handgun which cocks and drops the hammer.

PICTURES.

Assault Rifle (AR-15).



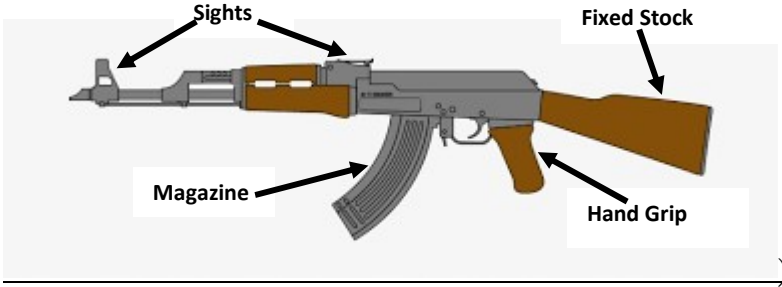
Note that AR-15 magazine is below the gun, therefore, it can be of any size without interfering with the shooter's aim. Thus, an assault rifle can hold much more ammunition than any other type of long gun.

Note also the collapsible stock which allows the gun to be concealed more easily and also allows the shooter more mobility while shooting the gun.

Note the fixed hand grip which gives the shooter more control of the gun both during shooting activities as well as moving from place to place with the gun.

Note that an assault rifle is always engineered to operate in semi-automatic mode, which allows for a faster rate of fire than a sporting or hunting gun.

Assault Rifle (AK-47)



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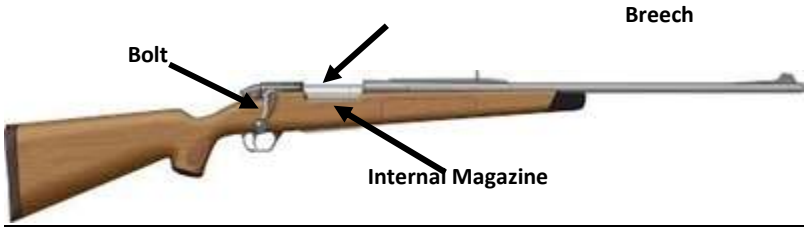
Note the high-capacity magazine which loads from the bottom. The AK-47 stock is usually fixed because the 30-caliber ammunition used by this gun creates more recoil than the 22-caliber ammunition used in the AR-15.

Bolt-Action Hunting Rifle

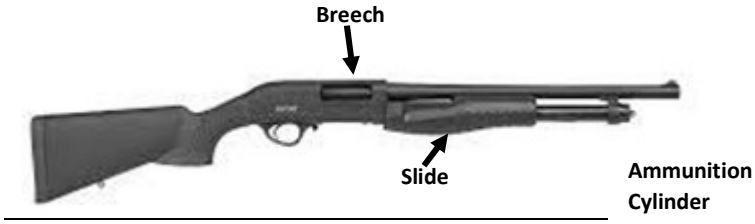


The assault rifles pictured above are semi-automatic guns, whereas a bolt-action rifle requires a manual movement to replace an empty, fired case with a fresh, unfired round after every shot.

Since this gun is used for hunting animals, it does not need to deliver large amounts of ammunition quickly, hence it does not need to be fired in semi-automatic mode.

Note the internal magazine which limits the ammunition capacity of the gun.

Pump Shotgun



This gun loads by pushing the slide along the ammunition cylinder which ejects the spent shotshell and inserts a fresh shotshell into the breech. The gun can only hold 3-6 rounds depending on the length of the cylinder.

Like the bolt-action rifle, this gun must be manually reloaded after every round is discharged, which is why such guns are considered hunting or sporting guns, given the slow firing rate.

Lever-action rifle

The lever-action rifle loads in similar fashion to the pump-action shotgun. It must be manually reloaded after every discharge by using the lever to eject an empty shell and replace it with a fresh round from the ammunition cylinder.

GETTING RID OF A GUN.

- Sell it to a gun dealer. The seller will need to provide the dealer with a name and address, but dealers do not and cannot verify the legal background of the gun's last owner.
- Hand it over to the police. The gun owner should check ahead of time to make sure that the particular agency will accept the gun without any problem.
- A gun should not be given to a friend or anyone else unless the owner believes himself to be in a state of immediate risk because of access to the gun.

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