

RESEARCH BRIEF

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COGNITIVE DECLINE AND HOUSEHOLD FIREARM STORAGE AMONG OLDER ADULTS

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BACKGROUND

As Americans age, more older adults are living with memory and thinking problems, sometimes long before a formal diagnosis like dementia. These changes can affect judgment and memory, both of which matter for safely **handling a firearm**. They are also linked to depression and behavioral changes that can **raise the risks of having an unsecured firearm at home**.

Doctors and major medical organizations recommend that clinicians **ask about firearms and encourage secure storage when patients show signs of cognitive change**, yet it has been unclear whether those conversations are actually changing how families store firearms, especially among older adults in the early stages, before any formal diagnosis. **Subjective cognitive decline**, when a person notices on their own that their memory or thinking is getting worse, is often the earliest signal, and it can be a good moment to start conversations about safety. Until now, little has been known about how firearms are stored in the homes of older adults who notice these kinds of changes.

APPROACH

C-FIP researchers analyzed 2023 data from a large national health survey run by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, called the **Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)**. That year, seven states asked questions about both firearm storage and recent memory or thinking changes, including Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, and Virginia.

Researchers focused on **adults age 65 and older** and looked at questions asking whether they had a firearm at home, how it was stored, and whether they had recently noticed memory or thinking problems. A firearm was considered “unsecure” if it was kept **loaded and unlocked** — the storage configuration most strongly linked to injury and death. Researchers then compared storage practices between older adults who had noticed cognitive changes and those who had not, accounting for differences in age, sex, military service, whether children lived in the home, and whether they lived in a rural or urban area.

FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH ON THIS TOPIC PLEASE REFER TO:

Conrick KM, Banks S, Schleimer J, Rowhani-Rahbar A. Cognitive Decline and Household Firearm Storage among Older Adults. *JAMA Internal Medicine* 2026.

RESULTS

Among adults 65 and older:



About **1 in 3** reported a firearm in the home — and that share was similar among those who had noticed cognitive changes and those who had not.



About **1 in 5** said they had noticed worsening confusion or memory loss in the past year.

Among older adults with cognitive changes:



23%

more likely to have household firearms stored loaded and unlocked than those who had not noticed any changes

Among older adults whose memory or thinking problems were already getting in the way of daily activities:



60%

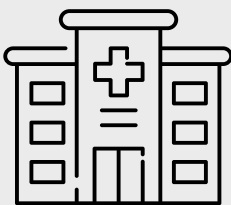
higher prevalence of storing household firearms than among other older adults with cognitive symptoms

IMPLICATIONS

Among the sample, older adults whose **cognitive changes were most pronounced**, and who arguably need the most thoughtful safety planning, are also the **most likely to say household firearms are stored in the riskiest way**.

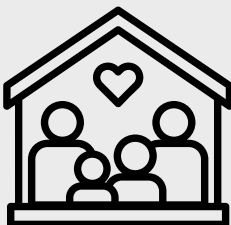
Older adults already have the **highest firearm suicide rate** of any age group in the United States. When unsecured firearms are present in homes where someone is experiencing cognitive changes, the risks of injury, suicide, and family harm grow.

For Doctors and Health Systems



- Make firearm storage part of routine conversations about aging alongside topics like driving and medication safety.
- Pair these conversations with practical tools, like free or low-cost locks.
- Decision aids such as the “Safety in Dementia” or “Firearm Life Care Plan” online tools can help guide both clinicians and families through these conversations.
- Give out locks in clinic.

For Families



- Treat firearm safety like any other part of safety planning that comes with aging.
- Start the conversation early, when the person experiencing changes can still be a full partner in the decision.
- Safer storage does not have to mean getting rid of a firearm — it can mean a lock, a safe, or temporarily storing it with a trusted person outside the home.