

Safe use of guns

HSE information sheet

Agriculture Information Sheet No 43

Introduction

This guidance is for employers and others whose work involves the use of rifles and shotguns, for example gamekeepers and farmers. Following this advice will help ensure that you use your gun safely and meet your legal obligations. It is not a substitute for proper instruction and training.

This information sheet replaces the previous HSE publication *Guns* (AS7).

What the law says

Employers and people who 'conduct an undertaking' involving the use of guns have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to take all reasonably practicable measures so that no one is put at risk.

In this sense, an 'undertaking' does not necessarily need to involve employment or commercial gain. The duty may extend to a wide range of individuals, including farm staff, gamekeepers, beaters, pickers-up, drivers, guests, volunteers and members of the public. In addition, employees have responsibilities for their own health and safety and for that of other people who may be put at risk by their work.

Along with work-related health and safety laws, there are other legal requirements that apply to buying and selling guns, licensing, firearm certificates, age restrictions, and storing guns and ammunition. You can get advice on these matters from your local police or from one of the organisations listed in the 'Find out more' section at the end of this information sheet.

Training and supervision

Anybody handling a gun ought to have received instruction on safe use. In addition, training on safe use is a legal requirement for all those using work equipment. This includes guns when used as part of a work activity. Suitable training courses are available

and useful contacts are listed in the 'Find out more' section. Close supervision of inexperienced gun users is usually appropriate. This is a legal requirement for employees.

Before using a gun

- Every time you pick up a gun check that it is unloaded.
- Check the barrels regularly for rusting, pitting and dents.
- Make sure the gun is 'in proof' and has been serviced regularly by a competent person, eg a reputable gunsmith.
- If the gun is new to you, familiarise yourself with all its features – especially the safety catch. Check how sensitive the trigger is. Use snap caps for this to avoid damaging the mechanism.
- Always check there is no obstruction in the barrels, eg snow or mud.

Passing a gun to a companion

The normal procedure is to completely unload a gun before handing it to another person. As an additional safety precaution, shotguns should also be broken, and the bolt open on rifles. Always check that the gun is unloaded before it is passed from one person to another.

There are occasions when it may be acceptable to hand over a gun when it is loaded, eg just before the end of a deer stalk or when a shooter is working with a loader on a double gun system. Only attempt this when both parties have fully rehearsed the procedure with unloaded guns. Always check that the safety catch is on before passing over the gun. Take special care not to drop or knock guns together.

When to load and unload

- Remove ammunition from the breech before putting a gun down.

- Only load a shotgun when you expect to take a shot in the immediate future and unload right away if the opportunity for shooting passes.
- Keep the magazine and breech of a rifle empty except when actually stalking.
- Always unload guns completely before entering a building or placing them in a vehicle. (Using a gun inside a building is potentially very dangerous and should only be carried out after taking specialist advice.)

Carrying guns

- If you're not likely to fire a gun, carry it unloaded with the muzzle downwards in its protective cover or case. This will help to avoid damage or barrel blockage.
- When resting, or walking to the next place you expect to take a shot, carry your shotgun unloaded and broken over your arm. In some circumstances you could carry it on your shoulder, but you will need to keep the trigger guard uppermost so the muzzles are sloping upwards. Make sure they are always pointing in a safe direction.
- When 'walking up' game with a loaded shotgun, keep the safety catch on and muzzles pointing in a safe direction.
- When stalking with a loaded rifle, keep the safety catch on and the rifle slung securely over one shoulder with the muzzle under control at all times.
- Check regularly that the safety catch has not been accidentally pushed to the 'off' position.
- Take care never to drop or jar a loaded gun. This may cause it to go off even when the safety catch is on.
- Never carry a rifle with a round in the breech, the bolt closed and the action cocked – it may fire unexpectedly.

Obstacles and difficult terrain

- Always remove ammunition from the breech of your gun before negotiating any obstacle or difficult terrain and before moving through thick cover.
- When crossing an obstacle with a companion, always unload both guns. Your companion should hold both guns until you are on the other side, then hand them to you empty and open, and preferably stock first, one by one.

Ammunition

- Make sure you have the correct ammunition and that it is undamaged and loads easily. Use a proper extractor to remove jammed cartridges.

- Never mix shotgun cartridges with different bore sizes – especially 12 and 20 bore. A cartridge of the wrong size could accidentally be loaded and lodge in the barrel beyond the chamber. If another cartridge is then loaded and fired the gun might burst.
- Check that rifle ammunition matches the calibre stamped on the rifle barrel.

Storage

- Store your gun and ammunition in different places. Remove the bolt of a rifle and store it separately.

Shooting

- You need good judgement and reactions – that means being calm and not having your senses dulled by fatigue, alcohol or drugs.
- To shoot accurately and safely you need to be in a position where you can adopt a firm, steady stance. Make sure you have a clear, unobstructed view of the target.
- When aiming a rifle, always check that there is nothing in line with the muzzle that isn't visible through the sight.
- Develop 'muzzle awareness' – a sense of always knowing exactly where your gun is pointing. Be constantly alert to the positions of other people in the area – not only other guns and helpers, but also members of the public. Take special care near public rights of way and roads.
- Keep your finger off the trigger until you are sure what you are shooting at and only release the safety catch immediately before firing.
- Always check you are shooting into a safe background. That means clear sky if you are shooting at birds in flight or a solid backstop if you are shooting at ground quarry. The backstop needs to be earth or some similar material which won't cause ricochets. That may mean arranging your position so that you are firing downwards. Never fire a rifle into woodland or light cover, or across water.
- Take extra care when shooting at night. Be absolutely sure you are shooting into a safe background and at the right target.
- Remember shotgun pellets can travel 300 m and a bullet from a deer rifle can travel 4 km.
- Rifle bullets and shotgun pellets can ricochet off water, bushes, fence wire or other obstacles on their way to the target. A telescopic sight may not always reveal these, so always check by eye that your line of fire is unobstructed.
- If your gun misfires take extreme care. Keep the muzzle pointing in a safe direction until the gun

has been made safe. Open the gun well away from your face and only when you are satisfied enough time has passed to be sure there will be no further detonation.

Organised shoots

- No matter how large or small the event, one person should have overall control. Make sure you know who that person is and what the agreed signals are. It is important to recognise the signal to stop shooting.
- When helpers are involved in beating and other supporting activities, keep your shots high so that no one is put at risk.
- If you are going to shoot behind, turn with the muzzle pointing to the sky, so that no one beside you is endangered.
- The person in control should issue clear instructions and information on potential hazards. They should also ensure that helpers who need to be in vulnerable positions wear high-visibility clothing or carry clearly visible markers so that shooters are alerted to their presence.
- Organise events so that no one comes within the expected arc of fire of a loaded gun. The only exception is if the person in control has established beyond all doubt that they are not within range.
- It is essential that clay pigeon shoots are organised so that they take into account the safety of participants, spectators and trap operators. Detailed guidance is available from the Clay Pigeon Shooting Association (<https://www.cpsa.co.uk/>).

Vehicles

- Always carry guns unloaded in vehicles, preferably kept in their protective cover or case. Use a fixed holster, carrier or gun clamp on tractors, ATVs and similar vehicles.
- It is only safe to shoot from a vehicle if it is stationary, and the muzzle of the gun is put outside the vehicle before placing a round in the breech.
- Shooting over an occupied vehicle is potentially dangerous. Only do it if you have agreed a safe system of work with all concerned. You need to make sure this eliminates any possibility of people entering the field of fire.

Hearing protection

Guns produce pulses of noise which are capable of causing instantaneous damage to your hearing. Even infrequent use may soon lead to permanent inability to understand speech.

Some people are more vulnerable to noise-induced deafness than others, so you should always wear suitable hearing protection. Take advice from an expert before selecting your hearing protection. If it is important to be able to talk to fellow shooters, non-linear electronic muffs are available which allow this.

Find out more

The following organisations will be able to provide advice on the safe use of guns and how to obtain suitable instruction and training:

British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Marford Mill, Rossett, Wrexham LL12 0HL
www.basc.org.uk

British Deer Society, Burgate Manor, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF www.bds.org.uk

Clay Pigeon Shooting Association, Bisley Camp, Brookwood, Woking, Surrey, GU24 0NP
<https://www.cpsa.co.uk>

Further information

For information about health and safety, or to report inconsistencies or inaccuracies in this guidance, visit www.hse.gov.uk/. You can view HSE guidance online and order priced publications from the website. HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops.

This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. Following the guidance is not compulsory, unless specifically stated, and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance.

This leaflet is available at:
www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ais43.htm.

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