

Health and safety

Before you take up shooting

Observance of the safety rules is an integral part of good gun ownership. Newcomers to gun ownership are advised to visit a reputable shooting school for a series of lessons to ensure they can handle a gun safely and proficiently before starting shooting. In the UK, we are fortunate to have a wide range of weekly and monthly shooting periodicals containing news and articles of interest both to the newcomer and the experienced sportsman.

They are well worth reading to keep up to date with developments in the shooting world. You should also join a relevant organisation such as GWCT, BASC, the Countryside Alliance, and the National Gamekeepers Organisation. Membership gives access to a wide range of services and ensures long term support for you and your sport.

Insurance

Although not a legal requirement in the UK it is strongly recommended that you never shoot unless you are adequately insured for injury and damage to third parties. It also makes sense to insure your own guns and shooting equipment against damage or loss. All the major shooting organisations offer insurance cover. Check the terms carefully as some activities, such as beating, loading and picking up, may not be covered if you are paid to do them.

Basic gun safety rules

- a) Never load your gun except when you are about to use it.
Unload it immediately after use.
- b) Never point a gun at anyone, whether it is loaded or not.
- c) Keep your guns and ammunition away from children and other unauthorised persons at all times.
- d) Check that your gun is unloaded on every occasion on which you pick it up.
- e) When handing a gun to someone else open the breech (or equivalent) and show it is unloaded before passing it over.
- f) Never load a gun indoors.
- g) Check that the barrels are not damaged or obstructed before loading.

- h) Never shoot unless you can see it is safe to do so. Except when shooting ground game it is a sound principle to be able to see sky below the barrels when the trigger is pulled.
- i) Never shoot at game which is near to a Gun, picker up or beater.
- j) Never swing through the line.
- k) Remain calm and steady throughout.



Check your gun is empty on every occasion you pick it up © GWCT

The safety catch

The safety catch is often not what it seems. Safety catches work in several different ways and you should familiarise yourself with the one fitted to your gun. Ideally the catch should lock the firing pin and the triggers but in most shotguns and in some other guns it only locks the triggers.

This means that if the gun is defective it could fire when the safety catch is on. Although most shotguns have automatic safety catches there are some which do not, so check before using a borrowed gun. You should never place too much reliance in the safety catch as a means of preventing accidental discharge although it should always be on except when you are about to fire.

A shoot employing five or more people has to have a health and safety policy

If your shoot employs five or more persons such as keepers, paid beaters or pickers up, even on a casual or temporary basis, you are required to have a written safety policy and bring it to the attention of your employees. A good time to do this is at the pre-shoot briefing. Because of the risk of noise damage to hearing you should ensure that hearing protectors are made available to any employee likely to be close to a gun when it is fired.

Employees must be properly trained in the use of any equipment or chemicals used in connection with shoot management or game rearing. Health and safety is often regarded by shoots as a tedious distraction but it does need to be taken seriously. The NGO website has excellent guidance on health and safety policy and risk assessments.

Shoot captain's briefing

The shoot captain, host or manager should brief all Guns and other shoot participants, however experienced, at the start of each day's shooting. The brief should always include a reminder about the importance of gun safety, as well as any local rules about the shooting of pests, game and ground game. Guns, beaters and pickers up will have a more enjoyable day if they know what is planned to take place. Especially on a new shoot, do not be afraid to ask questions at the briefing if there is anything about which you are uncertain.



When walking it is best to carry the gun in the crook of the arm, broken, with the barrels pointing forward and down. © GWCT

Carrying a gun safely

- a) In a vehicle and when walking into position unload the gun and put it in a slip or case.
- b) When walking it is best to carry the gun in the crook of the arm, broken, with the barrels pointing forward and down.
- c) The alternative is to carry it over your shoulder with the triggers uppermost and the barrel pointing in the air. This is not recommended on hilly land because of the risk that you may find the gun pointing at somebody higher up the hill, or that in the event of a fall the barrels could end up pointing at somebody.
- d) If your gun is fitted with a sling carry it over one shoulder with the muzzle pointing vertically in the air.
- e) Except during walked up shooting, never walk with the gun in the “ready” position i.e. with one hand on the barrel and the other near the triggers. Even then it should be pointing at the ground.
- f) Between drives the gun must be unloaded. It is normal for guns to be broken or carried in a slip.
- g) In thick cover or on rough ground, walk with the gun unloaded, even if it may mean missing a shot.
- h) Unload your gun before crossing a fence or other obstacle.

Dangers of mixing ammunition

Never keep cartridges of different bores together. A 20-bore cartridge accidentally loaded into a 12-bore gun (or 28 bore into 16 bore) will jam in the barrel beyond the chamber. A 12-bore cartridge can then be loaded inadvertently and fired. This almost invariably bursts the barrel and causes serious injury.

There are also several rifle cartridges which can be dropped into or even fired in the wrong chamber with possibly disastrous effects. Before shooting, check that the bore is clear and that the ammunition in your pocket is designed for the chamber of your gun. This requires an understanding of ballistics including gauge, shot size, load, pattern and choke for both steel and lead shot.