

Dry Fire Safety

Excerpted and adapted from *The Dry Fire Primer* by Annette Evans

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Dry firing at the range is, as I described, useful and encouraged. As long as you follow standard range safety rules when you do that, little can go wrong. A loud bang during range dry fire is scary and unexpected, but shouldn't result in injuries or property damage as long as you're handling your gun properly and keeping it pointed in safe directions.

It gets a lot more complicated than that once you take dry fire home. The rules of gun safety always apply whenever you are handling a firearm, and it makes no difference that you aren't "actually" shooting "for real."

Safe direction is perhaps the biggest one. On the range, it's easy to figure out what a safe direction is: towards the berm or backstop. At home, it can be a little harder, especially if you don't live in a rural area.

The best-case scenario for most people is to be able to find a sufficiently-sized surface in their home that is able to contain an errant bullet. You need to think about not just the wall you're facing, but what can go through that wall and what's beyond that wall. As anyone who has ever taken a defensive pistol class knows, there's a difference between cover and concealment, and what you really want for these purposes is something that can work as cover. In other words, just because you can't see through it doesn't mean that a bullet can't go through it.

Basements are fantastic if you have one. Not only do they place you in front of a natural berm since you're literally in a hole in the dirt, many basements are constructed out of concrete block or other materials that are bullet-resistant. Those same types of walls are often found between townhouse units too. Brick and stone also work, if you have a fireplace. None of these are great if a live round gets fired because there's a potential for ricochet and they may not be able to contain more than a round or two, but that beats a bullet ending up in a neighbor's yard or worse yet, a neighbor.

There are smaller options available in most homes. While they'll be limiting for more dynamic dry fire, they are certainly usable for many drills. These include the corners of exterior rooms, where building beams meet; the book cover end of a full bookcase (not towards the spines); a big bucket full of sand, perhaps disguised as a flowerpot; even purpose-made backstops like a ballistic vest or pad or armor plate.

I realize that not everybody has a true safe direction, especially in apartments or other shared living spaces, let alone one that works for multiple-target dry fire drills. Choosing the least bad is still a worthwhile exercise to minimize potential problems, as well as a good time to acknowledge that you need to be even more careful with the rest of your safety practices.

That means treating your dry fire gun with the same respect as you would if you were on the range, at a match or practicing with a real gun. Whether you use your actual firearm for dry fire or a gun-like object like a disabled firearm (with a training barrel or barrel block), a SIRT pistol, or even a completely inert blue gun, you should still handle it like an actual firearm.

What do I mean by that? When you pick up your dry fire gun, use a strong firing grip, index finger along the slide, and control the direction of your muzzle. Handle it with all of the respect you would give a loaded gun. (In fact, if you recall your Cooper's Rules of gun safety, this should sound familiar to you.)

It's not just a good safety practice, it's also a good gun-handling practice that you'll want to carry over onto the range. A regular dry fire regimen can cause you to become lax in how you treat your gun because you spend so much time with it. Because certain other safety rules may need to be bent or broken as part of dry fire, remaining extremely mindful of the rules that are maintained and intentional about the ones that aren't, will help keep you from putting bullet holes where you don't intend them to go.

Most dry fire by design requires you to press the trigger, sometimes an awful lot. That tosses the "keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot" rule right out the window. After all, you are by definition not intending to shoot a real, live round. It's important, then, to follow some of the other more concrete rules besides treating your firearm as if, and with the respect that it's due if, it were loaded.

The NRA rule goes "Always keep your gun unloaded until ready to use." Obviously, for dry fire, you're using the gun but not in a way where you intend to shoot it – so it's extremely important to be certain that there is no live ammunition in or near the gun that you're using, especially if you are using an actual, otherwise functional firearm, but even if you're not.

For those of us who are competitive shooters, consider having a house rule where your match gun is never loaded unless you are actively on the range live firing. For me, I even unload all of my magazines while still at the range. It's not a complete barrier against mistakes, but it does add a layer of protection against accidentally using a magazine loaded with real ammunition in dry fire.

If you are planning to dry fire with your carry or home defense gun, then you must not only unload it before each session, you have to be very careful about what happens after you're done with your dry fire session. It might be simpler to use another gun, set up to mimic your defensive gun, if you are able to. Backup guns can be good investments for live training classes in any case, and dry fire is just another reason to invest in one.

One of the most common negligent discharges in the home starts with the "but I thought it was unloaded" excuse, followed by a loud, unexpected bang. With dry fire, what tends to happen is that someone decides that they're done practicing, reloads their gun, then decides to do just a couple more reps...forgetting that their gun is hot again.

For this reason, there are a few rituals that you can use to demarcate the time between dry fire from the time after. One is to say aloud three times, "Dry fire practice is over," when you are done with a session. Saying and hearing it are sensory indicators to help you move from one state to another.

Another is to only ever dry fire in a specific room in your home, where your gun must always be unloaded to enter, and isn't loaded again until after you leave. We'll get back to why this separate space is a good idea in any case.

You can also set a rule that after you end dry fire and reload your gun, you put it aside and commit not to touch it for any reason for ten minutes or more before putting it away or back on. Keeping the gun physically away from you can help discourage a mindless return to what you thought was dry fire.

Either way, you must check, double check, and triple check that there is no live ammunition in your dry fire gun. This is a time when I like to not only look into the chamber in a well-lit area to ensure

there is no round there and that there is no magazine in place that could load a round, but I also might poke my finger inside and feel that it is empty. With revolvers, make sure to check the entire cylinder.

I highly recommend using a [BarrelBlok](#), which is inserted through the chamber and out the end of the barrel. Since it's bright orange, it will also provide a visual cue that your gun is ready for dry fire. Similar tools that require disassembly of your gun to install and uninstall also exist, but the BarrelBlok can be used with your gun fully assembled. You can DIY similar tools, but the BarrelBlok is inexpensive and completely fills the chamber of your gun, preventing it from falling out or being displaced by live ammunition.

My other trick is to use dummy rounds or snap caps. While they can be necessary to protect firing pins or breechfaces, the presence of a known inert round in the chamber means that a live round can't be there. It's important to have dummy rounds that are easily distinguished from your real ammunition – different color brass, marked brass, or a different bullet than your usual are all ways you can do this.

Another advantage to using a dummy round as a way to ensure that a real round isn't in your gun is that you can use weighted rounds, such as those loaded with real bullets but no powder and epoxy in place of primers, to approximate the weight of your loaded gun and magazines. Empty magazines and guns are somewhat less realistic for many aspects of dry fire, and a few dummy rounds in your magazines can help protect feed lips.

Whatever method you use to ensure that your dry fire gun is unloaded, the "hammer down" routine in competitive shooting is often billed as a way to check one last time that there isn't a live round in the chamber. We can learn from that and after preparing a gun for dry fire, point it at the safest direction available to us and consciously and intentionally pull the trigger.

Another common problem is forgetting to reload a carry or home defense gun after dry fire. Using and modifying some of the same ideas you use to make sure you remember that your gun is loaded after dry fire can help you make sure you actually perform that step.

For example, if you always say "Dry fire practice is over" three times after you are done dry firing, you can make the statement "Dry fire practice is over, it is time to reload my gun" instead. If you dry fire in a specific space, or with an alarm clock to set aside a specific block of time, you can place your real ammunition somewhere you'll see when you leave dry fire, or do something like put up a sign on the door leaving your dry fire dojo or a sticky note attached to your kitchen timer.

Whatever you do, I'd suggest still putting your carry or home defense gun aside for at least ten minutes after every dry fire session to demarcate practice time from "for reals" time. When you do that, actually take the gun off or put it somewhere that is not where you normally store it. It's a lot harder to be mindless about the state of your gun when you go to strap it back on or put it away wherever you stage your home defense gun, especially if you make a habit of checking the state of your gun before you do so.

And as a side note, do remember that ejecting and reloading rounds can cause bullet setback. Chambering the same round over and over again shortens its overall length, which compresses the powder in the casing, potentially leading to both feeding and ejection malfunctions as well as the theoretical danger of overpressure rounds. You don't want those kinds of problems with self-defense ammunition. Rotate the round that goes into the gun (try putting it at the bottom of your magazine) and keep track of how many times you chamber a particular round. I like Claude Werner's suggestion

to mark the bottom of each round you eject with a permanent marker so you don't have to rely on memory. After you go beyond 3-4 times, it's a good idea to save that round for range use only.

It seems like we've spent a lot of time on safety, but dry fire is a dangerous activity because of how many standard safety rules must be bent or broken in order to do it with a real gun. Don't ignore or skim past safety protocols in your bid to get a little more practice in; the consequences of getting this part wrong can be devastating.

Bonus: The Dry Fire Dojo

I've taken over half of a garage to dry fire in, and call it my dry fire dojo or studio. It's a space that I use for little else, and away from the rest of the house. I know that when I go in, it's time to pick up my practice mindset and not think or worry about anything but what I'm working on in dry fire. Stepping out there allows me to dry fire in peace, without distractions and interruptions because when that door is closed, everyone (including me) knows it's my time.

Having a separate area is not only about focus, though.

Part of it is the safety aspect already described. If you keep your dry fire dojo completely free of ammunition, it's one additional layer of safety against having rounds accidentally end up in your gun. While you should always check any dummy rounds that you are using for dry fire, it does help to always store them separately from live rounds.

Using the same space all the time also means that you don't need to think about safe direction every time you're getting ready to practice. For that matter, you can simply leave everything set up and ready to go. Later on, I'll get into details of what you might want in your dry fire dojo, but one of the keys to a regular dry fire practice is making it convenient.

By having one area where you can collect all of the tools you need, you won't have to run around the house finding everything just to get started. It's nice if it's a whole room where you can leave things set up, but even a box in a corner beats having your targets, dummy rounds, belt, holster, and other stuff scattered everywhere. When you're ready to practice, all you need to do is, well, practice. If you can only carve 15 minutes out of your day, not wasting 10 of it getting ready is invaluable.

And as a bonus, you might not get yelled at for leaving your "gun stuff" all over the place.

I realize not everyone has enough space in their house to set aside a room or a corner just for dry fire, but I encourage you to set aside what you can in order to make your practice more efficient and productive. It'll pay dividends down the line, I promise.

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