

A Simple Guide for Buying and Carrying a Self-Defense Handgun

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This article is for novices... *and* for long-time gun-owners.

You might be a woman looking for your first self-defense handgun. Or you might be a lifelong "gun person" that people come to for advice about guns. Either way this article is for you.

Every day, people who have never owned any sort of gun — perhaps have never even shot one — decide to get a self-defense handgun. They aren't gun people, they aren't going to become gun people, they aren't going to hunt or target shoot, they aren't going to practice a lot. But they want a home-defense handgun, and they want one suitable for concealed carry if they decide to go that route. In other words they want an effective, easy to use, easy to carry, all-around self-defense handgun.

After all the pluses, minuses, caveats, ifs, ands, and buts are factored in — this is my bottom-line gun recommendation, along with the reasons for it. This article presupposes that the prospective gun owner is healthy, of normal intelligence or better, and has no inherent fear of guns.

Long-time gun users will undoubtedly find the selection process interesting, and may wish to use this article as a basis for their own recommendations.

In any case, don't be put off because I start with some basics — it's only a few paragraphs, and they're necessary for clarity.

First, Get the Terminology Straight.

A *bullet* is the actual projectile that shoots out of a gun. Bullets are usually made of lead. They may be covered with a thin copper-alloy *jacket* that serves various purposes.

Cartridges are the individual complete units of ammunition. A single cartridge consists of a *bullet* that is set tightly into one end of a powder-filled metal *case*. Cartridges are what you load into a gun. Handgun cartridges are commonly sold in boxes of 50.

Caliber, in everyday usage, refers to a particular cartridge configuration. This configuration consists of bullet diameter, case size, and case shape. Examples are the .38 Special, .44 Magnum, or 9 millimeter Luger. Most rifles are designed to shoot only one particular caliber, but some handguns can shoot cartridges of two or more different calibers.

With this in mind, you should know that *bullets* — the actual projectiles — come in many weights and designs, even for one particular caliber. These different weights and designs allow bullets to be custom-tailored for particular applications, such as target shooting, hunting, self-defense, etc. A

well-stocked ammunition dealer will have several bullet options available for each caliber, and all of them can be shot in any gun of that caliber.

Handguns come in two basic types. The first type is the *revolver*, which has a visible rotating cylinder that holds the ammunition. Double-action revolvers — the type we're interested in for self-defense — require a comparatively long, firm trigger pull to fire. A single pull of the trigger rotates the cylinder (putting a fresh cartridge in position) *and* fires the gun. Revolvers typically hold five or six cartridges.

The second type is the *pistol* (or semi-automatic). Pistols hold ammunition in an internal magazine. Pulling the trigger on a pistol fires the gun. The gun then uses the energy of the "explosion" to automatically load a fresh cartridge in position, ready to fire. Currently available pistols can hold up to eighteen (or more) cartridges.

Finally, a *round* refers to either a complete *cartridge* or to just the *bullet*, depending on the context, which will generally make it clear. Let's get started.

Get a revolver.

Why? Because revolvers are rugged, simple to operate, easy to maintain, will function with any commercial version of its proper cartridge, and are forgiving of grime, lack of lubrication, and other neglect. Furthermore, if you pull the trigger on a revolver and it doesn't fire, you can pull the trigger again and bring an entirely new cartridge into firing position. Incidentally, this is exactly why policemen, hunters, campers, and other experienced folks (including myself) frequently carry revolvers. Because revolvers are simple and rugged, a used revolver is fine if it's in good condition.

If you're not going to train regularly, do *not* buy a semi-automatic handgun (a "pistol"), and don't let anyone talk you into getting one. Although there are many excellent and reliable semi-autos available nowadays (Glocks being a prime example; I own several), their comparative mechanical and operational complexity and their potential failure modes are simply not compatible with use by inexperienced or untrained people.

Let me repeat: if you aren't a gun person, or if you don't trust yourself to regularly maintain or train with your gun, you should *not* carry a semi-automatic handgun. Get a revolver.

What features should a revolver that is suited to both home defense and concealed carry have? Read on.

Get a quality, short-barreled, spur-less or concealed-hammer revolver.

Get a name-brand revolver (Smith & Wesson, Colt, Ruger, Taurus, perhaps a couple of others). This is your life you're talking about, so don't be a fool by pinching pennies. The gun you buy can easily continue to function for literally a hundred years or more, so get a good one the first time. I

think the best manufacturer of small revolvers is Smith & Wesson, but the others are also very good.

Get a revolver with a barrel *no longer than 2 1/2 inches*, because that size handgun can easily be carried concealed by just about anyone, in any normal concealment manner. If you're a larger person, or have good reasons for buying a particular revolver, the maximum barrel length can be extended to 3 inches.

Don't be concerned about the reduced aiming qualities of a short-barreled handgun in comparison to a long-barreled handgun. This isn't a target gun, it's a self-defense gun, and precision aiming features are not necessary. Why? First, if you're under attack there's little chance that you'll actually aim the gun in the conventional sense. You will instead *point* it at your attacker and pull the trigger. You'll never see the sights — a phenomenon often reported even by trained police officers. Second, if you do pull the trigger on an attacker, the overwhelming probability is that he'll be *at most* seven yards away — and quite likely just a few *feet* away.

Get a revolver that *has no exposed hammer spur*. The hammer spur is the curved metal piece that extends from the back of the gun and is used to cock a revolver for single-action shots. But you should never cock a revolver in that manner for self-defense use because it makes the gun too easy to discharge by accident. Therefore you won't need a hammer spur anyway. Furthermore, and quite important, the hammer spur can catch on clothing at the worst possible moment.

I highly recommend special *lightweight* revolvers, such as those made with titanium or aluminum alloys. Examples are the Smith and Wesson "AirLite" or "Scandium" models and the Taurus "Ultra-Light" and "Total Titanium" models. Why lightweight? Because they are more comfortable to carry if you decide to carry. Five-shot revolvers are usually somewhat smaller and lighter than six-shot revolvers, but both are suitable for our purposes.

What caliber of name-brand, short-barreled, spur-less (or concealed-hammer) revolver should you buy? Read on.

Get a .38 Special or .357 Magnum caliber revolver.

Guns in .38 Special caliber were the standard law enforcement caliber in America for over half a century, and they are still used by many law-enforcement officers and citizens. A .38 Special revolver is not so large that it's hard to carry or shoot, and not so small that it's ineffective at stopping attackers. Furthermore, any place that sells ammunition will sell .38 Special cartridges. In sum, do not buy a gun that shoots a smaller diameter or weaker caliber cartridge than the .38 Special, period.

The .357 magnum caliber is a significantly more powerful version of the .38 Special. The case of a .357 Magnum cartridge is slightly longer but otherwise identical to a .38 Special cartridge case. Because of this fact, you can shoot the shorter .38 Special cartridges in a .357 magnum revolver. The reverse is not true; that is, .357 magnum cartridges are too long to fit into a .38 Special gun.

What this means is that you can load a .357 Magnum revolver with cheaper, milder-recoiling .38 Special cartridges for practice shooting. When you load the .357 Magnum revolver for self-defense, you can use either .38 Special cartridges or high-powered .357 Magnum cartridges.

If the above confuses you, read it again. If that doesn't help, find someone who can show you what I'm talking about. If in doubt about any aspect of this, simply get a .38 Special. You'll be well-armed.

A final note: don't concern yourself about recoil of a lightweight .357 Magnum. If you ever have to shoot your gun in dire circumstances, it's likely that you'll only have to do so a couple of times. You'll never feel the recoil. In fact, because of the way the human body works under stress, you may not even hear the gun fire. In any case, if you do get a .357 and decide it kicks too much, you can always load it with .38 Specials.

Speaking of firing the gun — what ammunition should you use? Read on.

Load your revolver with jacketed hollowpoint bullets.

Above, I explained that bullets come in many different designs. One such bullet design is the *hollowpoint*. Hollowpoints are sold in different weights, with and without jackets, but all of them have a cavity in the tip which helps them expand when they hit a human or an animal. This expansion serves two important purposes in a self-defense gun: it causes more energy transfer and more damage to the attacker (which helps to stop him quickly) and it keeps the bullet from passing through the attacker and hitting an innocent person (which has happened many times with other types of bullets).

Jacketed hollowpoints of .357 Magnum or .38 Special caliber are generally heavy enough, strong enough, and fast enough to penetrate leather, thick clothing, minor obstacles, or a substantial layer of body fat and still do their job. They may even penetrate or break bones. If reading this makes you squeamish, then you're normal. But if you are being attacked by someone trying to strangle you, slash you, or shoot you, you won't be thinking about any of this. You'll simply want to stop him, right now. For the given reasons, when you load your gun for self-defense use, load it with jacketed hollowpoints.

A note: the bullet weight printed on an ammunition box has nothing to do with whether the bullets are hollowpoints, jacketed, unjacketed, solid, or whatever. The printed bullet weight is the total bullet weight, period.

Which particular hollowpoints should you use? Read on.

Use only name-brand self-defense ammunition.

This is another area where it's stupid to pinch pennies. Again, it's your *life* we're talking about. Don't use cheap commercial ammunition or reloads. They may have low-performance bullets, light target-shooting powder charges, or substandard cases or primers that could cause misfires or other problems.

Don't use your neighbor's special extra-deadly self-defense handload. First, hand-loading by fallible humans means you might have split cases, loose crimps, high powder charges, low powder charges, zero powder charges, loose primers, or oil-contaminated primers — any one of which could spell disaster in a moment of crisis.

Bottom line: get name-brand jacketed hollowpoint ammunition designed for self-defense, such as Federal Hydra-Shok, Remington Golden Saber, Speer Gold Dot, or Winchester Silvertip. That way there's a virtually 100% chance that when you pull the trigger, the gun will fire and the bullet will perform correctly.

Note: if you want to practice shooting with cheaper ammunition, that's fine, but it's best to use the same weight bullet as the ones you will use for self-defense. That way the recoil and target impact point will be the same. This is not absolutely essential, but recommended.

Taking care of your gun.

Revolvers are pretty easy to maintain. Keep them dry and lightly oiled on the exterior. Keep them out of dirt and lint, and learn to clean them properly after shooting by asking someone you trust how to do it. This could include your gun dealer.

One thing, however: DO NOT put a lot of oil on your gun, especially in or around the chambers (the holes where the bullets go). The oil can seep into the cartridge primers and make them fail to discharge.

I advise against shooting unjacketed ("lead") bullets in your gun, even for practice, because (depending on the particular gun or which cartridges you buy) you may have to work to get lead deposits out of the barrel. I'm afraid you just won't do that. Fortunately, inexpensive jacketed .38 Special cartridges suitable for practice shooting are easy to find.

How do I carry my gun?

This section is a bit long because *how* you carry a self-defense gun is generally more important than the kind of gun you carry. In most self-defense situations, if you can't access your gun cleanly and instantly, you may as well not have it.

Keep in mind that, depending on the situation, you may use *all* of the carry methods below. I do.

Holsters — The Best Method

In terms of quick, easy access, waist holsters are generally the best way to carry a handgun. I don't recommend shoulder holsters because they are harder to put on, harder to conceal, harder on the gun due to moisture and salt from the armpits, and are often less comfortable when compared to waist holsters.

Waist holsters come in two main types: inside-the-pants (which provide better concealment) or outside-the-pants (which are more comfortable but require a longer outer garment for concealment).

Inside-the-pants holsters fit inside the pants waistband, against your body. They are attached by loops through which your belt passes, or by a clip that grips your pants waistband and/or belt.

Outside-the-pants holsters fit completely outside your pants. They are attached by means of loops or slots through which your belt passes, or by a "paddle" system.

Paddle holsters have a largish curved plate (the paddle), usually made of plastic, and a clip that grips your belt. The advantage of these holsters is that they can be slipped on and off without undoing your belt or pants, and the paddle keeps the holster properly positioned. Current versions generally are comfortable and work well.

Holsters often come with a strap that passes over the top of the gun. The straps (which are called retention straps, security straps, safety straps, thumb breaks or thumb snaps) are fine for law enforcement carry, hunter carry, and military carry — that is, when used by people who are well trained in disengaging the strap, or who generally know in advance when they must draw their gun.

However, for most folks carrying a concealed gun, a retention strap will hinder rapidly drawing the gun. So whether you buy an inside- or outside-the-pants holster for self-defense carry (either is fine) you should definitely get a holster designed to hold the gun securely in place *without a retention strap*. These holsters work by being closely molded to the shape of the gun, or by having an interior projection or squeezing device to hold the gun. They are called strapless or open-top holsters. That's what you want.

Fanny Packs

Many people carry their guns in fanny (waist) packs. This can be a good method, especially for motorcycle or bike riders or hikers, but only if the gun can be quickly accessed from the fanny pack. (By the way, a gun in a *back* pack is very hard to get to quickly, and backpacks are often easy to steal. Do not carry your gun in a backpack unless you have absolutely no other choice.)

A warning: if you live where politicians believe you have no right to defend your life with a firearm, be aware that police officers will automatically assume that *large* fanny packs, especially *black* ones, especially if carried by a *man*, have a gun inside.

Pockets

For both men and women, depending on the weather and situation, a gun can be carried in a coat or jacket pocket. Make sure the pocket is empty of dirt and other objects, and make sure that the gun

can't fall out under normal movement. Also make sure that the gun isn't obvious to people standing nearby — which usually rules out the front pockets of light pants and the back pockets of almost all pants.

Purses

It is probably impossible to prevent women from carrying guns in their purses. This is unfortunate because for many reasons purses are generally a bad place to carry a gun.

First, purses are the targets of thieves. If your purse is stolen, you'll lose your expensive gun and it'll likely end up on the black market in the hands of some criminal.

Second, unattended kids get into purses (though they should be taught NOT to — see section below about kids).

Third, purses are filled with other objects that impede quick access to your gun. If you need your gun, you're going to need it quickly, and you won't have time to paw through notebooks, cell phones, compacts, etc. to find it. Nor may you have time to unzip that little side pocket to get it. You'll need it *right now*.

Fourth, purses are full of tiny objects like pins, coins, lost beads, lint, and other debris that can work their way into a gun and keep it from functioning. A gun that doesn't function is just a piece of metal.

Nevertheless, women's clothing styles often dictate that a purse is the only realistic place remaining for women to carry a gun. So if you're going to do this, *get a purse designed to carry a gun!* You can find one through an internet search, by asking gun dealers, or by buying gun magazines and reading the ads.

Barami Grips

For men or women, I also recommend buying and installing a set of Barami Hip-Grips if they're available for your model. Hip-Grips are similar to regular grips, and don't prevent you from carrying your gun in a regular holster. But they also have an integral lip that will catch on your belt or waistband, allowing you to simply stick your gun inside your pants waistband, leaving the grip still projecting and easy to grab. This means, for example, that if you want to walk to the corner convenience store, or need to make a nighttime walk to your car or a motel ice machine, you can poke your gun in your pants, pull your shirt over it, and go — nothing else to mess with.

These grips have other characteristics making them good for concealed carry. They are smooth and won't catch on clothing; they're black and therefore unobtrusive, color-wise; and they're small and make a minimal bulge, even under lightweight shirts. For women, this latter quality makes them fit smaller hands.

You'll have to search around for Barami grips. Try your local gun dealer, Shotgun News at your newsstand, or the internet. (AjaxGrips.com is one place that sells a complete line)

When should I carry my gun?

First, remember that the gun I have recommended is perfectly suitable for a home defense gun as well as a carry gun. You may or may not wish to carry it.

In some states, politicians (almost always Democrats) believe that only the lives of "special people" — usually the politicians themselves, friends of these politicians, celebrities, or people who carry money/valuables — are worth defending with guns. They have issued unconstitutional edicts making it a crime for their constituents (people like you and me) to carry guns to defend against vicious criminals (who carry any gun they want, any time they want). Yet almost all of these politicians are protected by armed guards at work and at home, usually 24 hours a day — just like COA says in its national pro-gun radio and print ads (www.citizensofamerica.org).

I say to hell with them and their edicts. These politicians are immoral, unethical, hypocritical, elitist, and control-obsessed. They clearly don't care about your life, or the lives of your family members. I would describe them as evil. No politician will ever prevent me from carrying a gun to protect myself, my family, or my neighbor with a gun. I carry a gun whenever I feel the need to do so, which is frequently.

You must decide if and when you carry a gun. You may decide, as many people have, that you should carry it every day. The bottom line: It's your life (and/or your spouse/children's lives). You have the right to defend these lives. And you have the right — not just morally, but Constitutionally — to carry the most effective and convenient tool to effect this defense — a handgun.

A final thought on this subject: simply *owning a gun* will not protect you from violent criminals; you must *have the gun with you* when they attack.

What about my children?

It is better to gun-proof (educate) your children than try to child-proof your guns. This means teaching your children what a gun is, what it can do, and that they should never touch it without your permission.

From personal experience, empirical historical evidence, and overwhelming anecdotal evidence, it seems far better to go a step further and *familiarize* kids with guns. That is, let them look at and hold your unloaded gun. This satisfies their natural curiosity and indicates on a fundamental level that you trust them — and most kids will try not to abuse such adult trust.

Even better, let your child watch you shoot a cantaloupe, honeydew melon, or watermelon so that they can experience the noise and damage a gun can do. When they are mature enough (probably around eight years of age for most kids) teach them how to load and shoot the gun.

DO NOT trust "secret" hiding places or trigger locks, especially with older children. Such "secrets" tend to be uncovered when you aren't around, and many trigger locks can be taken off or otherwise defeated with a little effort. Even gun safes can be left open by accident, or your children may find the safe's keys or combination and open it.

Again, *educate* your kids rather than attempt to outsmart them. If you do this, a lapse of safety on your part need not lead to tragedy.

Final Notes

- If you absolutely can't afford a gun precisely like the one I recommend, get one as close to it as possible. In this article the desirable qualities of a reliable, simple, effective, easily-carried self-defense handgun have been arranged in order of importance, topmost (revolver) being the most important.
- Shoot at least twenty-five rounds (half a regular box) from your gun every six months. It keeps you familiar with its operation and your own abilities.
- Put fresh (but not necessarily brand new) cartridges in your gun every six months.
- Take basic gun safety and shooting lessons. There are NRA instructors in just about every city, and many shooting ranges offer lessons, or can put you in contact with instructors. This is the smart and responsible thing to do, so do it.
- Learn about the laws regarding self-defense. An excellent and very readable book on this subject is [In the Gravest Extreme](#), by Massad Ayoob. Find it at your local gunshop, or try Amazon.com or other online booksellers. This is the smart and responsible thing to do, so do it.
- Work to elect politicians who trust you to carry a gun and believe your life is worth as much as their own.

Brian Puckett is a hunter, hiker, and big-city dweller. He has written for numerous gun magazines such as Guns & Ammo, Handguns, American Handgunner, Combat Handguns, and SWAT. He currently serves as president of Citizens Of America (www.citizensofamerica.org), which runs a national pro-gun rights advertising campaign.