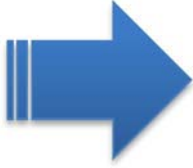


# **How to Choose the Right Handgun Caliber for Self-Defense**



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Introductory content is for shooters who are new to the subject. This content typically includes step-by-step instructions on how to get started with this aspect of the shooting sports and learn the fundamentals.

### **Intermediate**

Intermediate content is for shooters who are familiar with the subject but have only basic experience in the subject matter. This content typically covers the fundamentals and moves on to reveal more complex activities, drills and tips.

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## *About the author*

### **Carrie Lightfoot**

As a firearm enthusiast, and NRA certified handgun instructor, Carrie has set her sights on opening and expanding the world of firearms to women, working to “demystify” the unnecessarily confusing and intimidating male-driven industry.



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## Introduction

Your choice of gun for self-defense may be one of the most important decisions you make when preparing to defend yourself, your loved ones, and your home from violent attack. There are many options out there including both long guns and handguns. Making the decision of which is best for you can be challenging, but it is important to take the time to understand your unique needs. Do your research when deciding which is best for you.

This eBook focuses on finding the right caliber handgun for your self-defense and contains some essential things to consider when making your selection.

## Understand what caliber is and what it means in self-defense use

It is important to understand how caliber applies to stopping an attacker when selecting your self-defense handgun/ammunition combination. We all want the best handgun with the best ammunition to effectively stop an attacker. Accuracy is one defining factor, and serious training is required to acquire the ability to hit where you need to hit in the stress of an attack, but the caliber you select will be the primary factor regarding equipment selection.

### Incapacitation Data by Caliber

	Failure to Incapacitate	One-shot-incapacitation*
.25ACP	35%	49%
.32ACP	40%	72%
.38 Special	17%	55%
.357 Magnum	9%	61%
.45ACP	14%	51%
Rifle (all centerfire)	9%	80%
.22 short, long, long-rifle	31%	60%
.380ACP	16%	62%
9mm Luger	13%	47%
.40 S&W	13%	52%
.44 Magnum	13%	53%
Shotgun	12%	86%

(source: Greg Ellifritz – [BuckeyeFirearms.org](http://BuckeyeFirearms.org)) \*torso or head hits

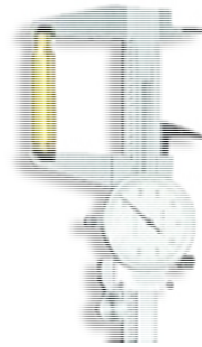
Caliber is the inside diameter of the barrel of your handgun, a measurement that matches the diameter of the projectile portion of the ammunition cartridge. A .40 caliber gun has a barrel with a .40 inch barrel diameter and uses .40 caliber ammunition. It is measured primarily in fractions of an inch with a few calibers measured in millimeters, such as 9mm. Exceptions always apply, but with handgun calibers, the smaller the diameter, the smaller the round, and the smaller the bullet hole in the attacker! Choosing the right caliber for your self-defense means that you must consider both the characteristics of the gun and those of the ammunition.



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Which caliber is best for your self-defense? That is a bit complicated and not quite as simple as *bigger-is-better*. A handgun of any caliber is better than none. For many (and for a variety of reasons), smaller calibers can be handled more easily and controlled more effectively. On the flip side, smaller handgun calibers (such as .22, .25, and .32) are usually not recommended for self-defense use, as the bullet size is considered too small to inflict enough damage to stop an attacker quickly enough. Because the damage inflicted is less traumatic, especially when used against a larger attacker or one that is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, small bullets can have little or no real stopping power. Of course, there are the exceptions. As we start to look at the statistics, it becomes clear that smaller calibers just don't work in your favor.



If you choose a smaller caliber handgun for your self-defense, you must practice often to be as accurate as possible in a life-threatening situation. When using a small caliber handgun, you must rely on your ability to get off multiple shots that hit critical areas in order to stop the assailant quickly.

There is an apt quote by Col. Jeff Cooper:

*“If you must carry a .25 ACP caliber pistol, do not load it. For if you load it, you might use it. And if you shoot somebody with it, and they find out about it, they’re likely to be very upset with you.”*

When selecting your handgun and ammunition combination, know what the pair can do, and add to that your capabilities. The right choice will be easier to make.

## Gun Type

Typically larger caliber handguns are also larger in size. They weigh considerably more, and when you factor in the weight of a loaded magazine, they can be heavy. This makes them cumbersome and harder to carry on the body. This is less of a factor if the gun will be a home defense gun that is not to be carried concealed. The greater weight and overall size provide stability for greater accuracy with less felt recoil. These are important factors.



Concealed carry guns, like the [Nano](#) or the [Pico](#), however, are generally smaller in size and lighter in weight so they can be comfortably worn or carried. These characteristics sacrifice accuracy. These smaller guns have less weight and substance to absorb the energy produced when firing. All of the recoil energy produced must go somewhere, so it ends up in the hands and arms. This does not necessarily make a full-sized pistol better than a compact model, it is just important to understand what is sacrificed

and then train to overcome and manage these shortfalls.



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When these smaller concealable guns are chambered in a lower caliber, they are a breeze to shoot, yet they produce less damaging wounds. You see where this is going. A tiny concealable pistol in a diminutive caliber may have limited functions for self-defense. The important thing to understand about larger calibers is that the higher the calibers in smaller framed guns, the harder they are to manage. Still, for most of us, carrying a smaller more compact gun is a practical choice. It would not be very practical for a 115 pound woman to carry a full sized, steel-framed .45 caliber handgun in her bra! The pistol has to have stopping power and be concealable.

### **Comparison among gun sizes**

	length	width	weight	capacity
<b>Px4 Full Size</b>	7.68	1.42	27.7	17
<b>Px4 Compact</b>	6.8	1.42	27.2	15
<b>Nano (micro CCW)</b>	5.63	0.9	19.8	6

Source: Beretta.com

Deciding between a semi-automatic pistol and a revolver is a key consideration. Generally, larger caliber semi-automatics have slides that can be more difficult to rack. This is an important factor if you lack upper body strength or have some issues with you hands, such as arthritis. In a defensive situation, when seconds count, your physical abilities become limited. You will experience a loss of fine motor skills due to the stress. The ability to rack the slide effectively and quickly is critical. Most smaller-caliber semi-automatics have more manageable slides for those with limited strength. Regardless, training is important.

Another significant factor is magazine capacity. Many pistol models carry large numbers of rounds in their magazines. Many people consider revolvers more reliable as they are more simple machines, so there is less that can go wrong. However, revolvers generally hold fewer rounds in their cylinders. The newer semi-automatic models are so well engineered that reliability is becoming less of a factor. Because of this, revolvers (which are bulkier, heavier, and have a lower round capacity) are often passed over. The standard capacity for a concealable revolver in .357 Magnum is five or six rounds, and that hard hitting round remains popular for self-defense.

## *Recoil*

Recoil is not just about comfort while shooting at the range. The greater the recoil, the more difficult it is to get back on target quickly. There is greater movement of your hand and the gun. Your ability to effectively get your gun back on your attacker is critical as there is no guarantee



that one shot will stop the threat. One must train and be prepared to shoot multiple rounds on target, quickly. Training is the key here. Learning to handle and master the recoil of your handgun is the only way to effectively use higher caliber handguns and ammunition. Heavier guns are also naturally harder to hold for any period of time and keeping your gun on the attacker holding him at bay while you await help might be challenging.



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## *What kind of ammunition options does it have?*

Remember, handgun caliber and the caliber of ammunition go together, so the ammunition must be thoroughly considered too. The recoil generated through the gun, your hand, and to your arm is primarily determined by the ammunition you shoot through the gun. Things like powder charge, and the weight and size of the bullet (the projectile itself) determine the amount of energy produced.

The availability and the type ammunition you will use to train and defend with are important considerations. Some calibers are more readily available than others, and some of these variables can change due to demand and, potentially, your location.



You will train often and go through large quantities of ammunition. Cost can be a significant factor for some. Some calibers, such as .22 and 9mm, can be less expensive. Defensive ammunition, bullets designed to inflict the most damage to the attacker, can be very expensive. Although it is important to practice shooting with your defensive ammunition, you will likely use minimum amounts. A standard full metal jacket practice round will be the best option for regular training. Some companies offer standard training and defensive rounds with identical ballistics. This means the rounds you train with will have the same recoil and point of impact as the rounds you use for self defense. This makes a lot of sense and helps to build your confidence by allowing you to know exactly what you can expect without having the high cost of training with large quantities of the more expensive defensive ammunition.



Ogive, core and “mushroom” of 9mm defensive round

Based on the [FBI study done in 1989](#) titled “FBI's Handgun Wounding Factors and Effectiveness,” defensive ammunition is designed to penetrate at least 12 inches and inflict internal damage in the largest area possible. Jacketed or bonded hollow points are the most popular defensive round and are readily available. These are the defensive rounds most commonly used by law enforcement. The bullet (projectile) has an open or hollowed tip intended to force the bullet to expand upon entry. This expansion can decrease over-penetration. Expansion also helps dump the bullet's energy in the intended target, producing the greatest amount of tissue damage.



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You'll see some ammunition labeled as +P.. This means the rounds are loaded with a bit more pressure but still within industry standards. The +P round provides more energy to reliably get an expanded bullet deep enough to do its job. Some guns are designed for standard pressure ammunition only and should not be fed the +P ammunition. Always check with the manufacturer of your specific handgun before using +P ammunition. Also consider that it will have more recoil and be harder to control than standard ammunition.

### *Where does the bullet stop? Where does it go?*



Over-penetration is an extremely important factor to consider. If you live in an apartment, where the projectile goes after you fire it is of the utmost importance. If you miss your shot, or it passes through the attacker, it may place neighbors or others in adjoining rooms in danger. Do you live in an apartment with a family with children next door? What is your home or apartment constructed of? Is it brick or drywall? This might affect the defensive ammunition you load when you are home. Does the bullet stop, or does it pass through the wall or the attacker? Knowing

your layout and where the best place to fight from is important. If you are outside of your home, you may have innocent bystanders near the attacker. Knowing what lies behind your target is your responsibility.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by numbers and statistics. The important question is still very personal: *what do the different calibers do and which one is right for you?*

We are getting there. Despite the confusing nature of caliber selection, you should understand some basic statistics and what research shows us about the effectiveness of the different rounds. All of the science in the world means nothing if we don't understand how it applies to us in our lives.

Here is some research done by Greg Ellifritz for an [article for US Concealed Carry](#).

Greg collected data on nearly 2000 shootings over the course of 10 years of research. He looked at the following variables:

- Caliber
- What percentage of people shot stopped their aggressive action after one hit to the torso or head?
- On average, how many shots did it take to stop the attacker?
- What percentage of attackers did not stop no matter how many rounds they took?



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Caliber	% Stopped after 1 shot	How many shots to stop	% That did not stop
.22 (short, long, long rifle)	60%	1.38	31%
.25 ACP	49%	2.2	35%
.32 (ACP and long)	72%	1.52	40%
.380 ACP	62%	1.76	16%
9mm Luger	47%	2.45	13%
.38 Spl	55%	1.87	17%
.357 Magnum	61%	1.7	9%
.40 S&W	52%	2.36	13%
.45 ACP	51%	2.08	14%

From the above, the lower calibers, (.22, .25, .32) have a noticeably higher percentage of attackers that were not stopped as compared to the larger calibers. Two or three times higher! This data looks only at torso and headshots, so shot placement is the key factor.

### *Available holsters and accessories*

Something often overlooked when making the decision on which caliber gun to own is the availability of important accessories. [Holsters](#) effectively carry the gun on your body. If you select a larger sized, high caliber gun, finding the right holster to carry its larger frame and weight as comfortably as possible is an important concern.

When the purpose of your gun is self-defense, there are some accessories that can bring significant advantages. Shock absorbing grips help make shooting a higher caliber gun more comfortable and improve your grip. [Night sights](#) glow in the dark to help you get on your target in the low light. [Tactical flashlights](#) can be mounted on your gun for dealing with an attacker in the dark. These are just some common accessories to be considered and researched for availability and proper fit and or mounting.

**Here are some things you must think about and consider:**

- What is the purpose of the gun? Is it for home defense or concealed carry?
- What are your physical abilities and challenges?
- Do the properties of the gun, such as size and weight or revolver or semi-automatic, fit your needs and abilities?



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- What are the ammunition options available and which are right for you?
- What are the over penetration factors and risks?
- If you plan on carrying the gun, can you do so comfortably and in a way that fits your clothing styles?
- What additional accessories do you need, and are they available for the gun you select?

Once you have made your selection, I cannot say enough about the importance of training. Regardless of what caliber you select for your self-defense, it means nothing if you cannot effectively draw and get your gun on target quickly and shoot accurately. There is no substitute for your skill level when it comes to successful self-defense. You could be carrying the largest .50 caliber monster gun available, but it does you no good if you cannot hit your attacker.

## Conclusions

As you can see, selecting the right caliber gun for your self-defense is a multifaceted decision. You must consider a multitude of factors to develop the self-defense strategy best for you.

Caliber is an important factor, but just one of many. Make sure you choose a caliber that is compatible with a gun you can handle under stress. Be sure that you are comfortable with the recoil level of your chosen combination of gun and ammunition. Make sure that you can find ammo at reasonable cost. Moreover, do not forget to think through holster options if you intend to carry concealed. Whatever combination you choose, remember that there is no substitute for training and regular practice.



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