Handgun Ammo for self defense

HANDGUN AMMUNITION BY CALIBER

.22 Long Rifle

You should really be using something bigger than a .22 for self-defense, but even a .22 LR beats nothing. (It also beats the .25 Auto.) Full size .22 handguns are usually very accurate and they are the best way to learn how to shoot a handgun. Their 4" and longer barrels extract considerably more velocity and energy from the little .22 LR cartridge than pocket models and their longer sight radius makes them much easier to aim. This makes them superior to pocket models for home defense.

There are some nice .22 pocket autos and mini-revolvers that make sense for special concealed carry situations (vest pocket carry, for instance, or a woman's dress purse). NAA mini-revolvers, at least the models with sights (Black Widow, etc.), are generally more accurate and more reliable than .22 pocket autoloaders. They are also quite safe to carry with the hammer down between two chambers. However, since they are single action revolvers, the user must be well acquainted with SA revolver operation before choosing an NAA mini for personal protection.

Choose any Federal, Remington, Winchester or CCI copper-plated 37 grain (or lighter), high velocity hollow point round. I recommend CCI Stinger 32 grain or Remington Yellow Jacket 33 grain hyper-velocity hollow points, as they have been very reliable in my Beretta 21A and Walther TPH pistols and have the highest stopping power ratings.

Shoot a lot of rounds through your self-defense .22.The ammo is cheap and you want to be sure to pick a reliable round. If high velocity solids don't cycle reliably, try standard-velocity. There is little difference in power, but it may improve your gun's reliability (e.g. Jennings J-22 pistols are more reliable with standard-velocity solids). Marksmanship is crucial with such a tiny gun. Brain shots that destroy the medulla oblongata are the most reliable stoppers.

Keep your .22 autoloader meticulously clean; these tiny guns cannot function reliably with gunk in them. If you carry your .22 in a pocket, purse or ankle holster, inspect it daily and brush off any dust or grit with an old toothbrush. Lubricate it properly. This is very important.

.22 WMR

The .22 Magnum is much better than the .22 LR and perhaps better, in full size revolvers, than most calibers less powerful than the .32 ACP. 40 grain JHP loads are the traditional choice, with Winchester's 40 grain JHP load scoring highest in 4" and longer barrels. Winchester also offers a Defender 40 grain JHP self-defense load in .22 Magnum.

The Speer 40 grain GDHP-SB load was tailored for use in mini-revolvers with 2" and shorter barrels. The Hornady Critical Defense 45 grain FTX load, also developed for use in mini-revolvers, is another possibility. An NAA Black Widow mini-revolver in .22 Magnum is probably as good as "mouse guns" get.

.32 ACP (7.65 mm Browning, 7.65x17mm)

Use the Winchester Super-X 60 grain Silvertip Jacketed Hollow Point, provided it is reliable in your gun. Hornady offers a 60 grain XTP-HP and Federal offers a 65 grain Hydra-Shok JHP to compete with the Winchester Silvertip load.

Many of the common .32 autos on the market are only reliable with 71 grain ball. These include the Llama, Walther PP and PPK, CZ-24, CZ-70, Davis P-32, Mauser HSc and others.

Worth mentioning is that, in a pinch, .32 ACP cartridges can be fired in .32 H&R Magnum and .327 Magnum single action (SA) revolvers. The .32 Auto is a semi-rimmed cartridge and it has enough rim to headspace in revolver cylinders. This small rim will not catch the extractor star of double action (DA) revolvers, but presents no problem for the external extractor rod of Ruger SA revolvers.

.380 ACP (9mm Short, 9x17mm, 9mm Kurz)

The three or four best .380 JHP rounds have better stopping power than most bullets fired out of a 2" barrel .38 Special revolver, so the .380 can no longer be considered a "mouse gun" caliber. All of the well known US ammo manufacturers load good hollow points for this caliber, but getting them to expand out of the short barreled autos ("pocket pistols") typically favored for concealed carry is quite difficult. Bullets that expand properly when fired from a service pistol (Walther PP or Baikal IJ-70a, for example) may not expand at all when fired from little guns, such as a Walther PPK or Glock 42.

Good all-around .380 ACP loads:

> Winchester 90 grain Defend - Top expansion in the Lucky Gunner .380 ammo tests (averaged .63")
>
> Hornady Critical Defense 90 grain FTX - A soft-plastic-tipped bullet that is building a good reputation.
>
> Sig Sauer Elite 90 grain V-Crown - Made by Sierra for Sig Sauer and performs well in FBI protocol gelatin tests, including Lucky Gunner.
>
> Speer 90 grain Gold Dot JHP - A good all-around hollow point.

Reliability is crucial and thus you must test JHP rounds in your pistol before carrying. A hollow point load that feeds well in the Colt Government Model .380, H&K HK4, Taurus PT-58, older PP and PPK, Bersa .380, Beretta 70s, Makarov and Hungarian FEG is the Remington 88 grain JHP. These are all good guns that might choke on other hollow points, but they will probably feed the Remington fine. If your .380 chokes on other JHP loads, try fifty rounds of the Remington 88 grain through your gun and see if it improves.

Unfortunately, in the Lucky Gunner ballistic gelatin ammo tests, this load did not expand at all when fired from a Glock 42 with a short 3.25" barrel. Unlike revolvers, auto pistol barrel measurements include the chamber, so the actual effective barrel length of the G42 is around 2.25".

.380 ACP hollow point loads to avoid:

> Winchester Super-X 85 grain Silvertip - I really cannot recommend this jam-prone round, although the Silvertip bullet expands more reliably than most in .380 caliber. It functions reliably in a few modern European guns (e.g. SIG P230/P232, Glock 42 and Beretta 84F), but the Silvertip may jam in many older American-made .380 automatics. The .380 Silvertip was once state-of-the-art, but it has since been superseded by newer designs.
>
> PMC-Eldorado Starfire 95 grain JHP - This round is weak and jam-prone.
>
> Federal 90 grain JHP (380BP) and Hornady 90 grain XTP (9010) - Both the Federal 380BP and the Hornady XTP seldom expand and may jam many guns, due to their truncated-cone bullet nose profiles. Pass by these two.

95 grain ball:

> Use only ball ammo in the Davis P-380, Accu-Tek, EAA .380, Tanarmi, AMT/OMC/TDE Back-Up, Heritage, FIE, Jennings, Bryco, Lorcin, Llama and other bargain priced autos. Hollow points should not be used in these low-priced guns, due to reliability problems.

9mm Makarov (9x18mm)

Despite its "9mm" nomenclature, this cartridge actually uses an odd diameter bullet, about 9.2mm. The performance of the 9x18mm is virtually identical to the far more popular .380 ACP. The Russian Baikal IJ-70 commercial Makarov pistol was produced in both calibers, so if you have a choice, get the .380 version.

Alone among the major US ammo makers, Hornady offers a serious 9x18mm defensive load. This is the Critical Defense 95 grain FTX load (#91000).

.38 Special

.38 Special ammunition is loaded to two pressure levels: standard pressure and +P. Standard pressure loads may be used in any .38 Special revolver, but +P loads should be used *only* in revolvers specifically rated by the manufacturer for such loads.

+P ammo should not be used in most small, aluminum-framed, .38 Special revolvers. Firing a few +P loads in your aluminum-framed revolver may not destroy it or cause it to explode, but it will damage your revolver if you fire more than a hundred rounds. The main problem with carrying +P .38 Special loads in an aluminum-framed .38 Special revolver, besides excessive wear and tear on the gun, is that the kick is nasty and slows repeat shots.

.38 +P ammunition is generally at its best when fired in 4" or longer barrels. These cartridges are typically loaded with more powder and slower burning powder than standard velocity cartridges and generally require at least a 4" barrel to achieve their intended velocity.

Fixed sight .38 revolvers are regulated at the factory to shoot to the point of aim with 158 grain bullets, as this was the weight of the long-time standard US and Canadian police load. Lighter bullets

will normally shoot low (some very low). This is not a problem, of course, with revolvers equipped with adjustable sights

The best loads for .38 Special revolvers with 4" or longer barrels:

> The Numero Uno .38 defense load for your 4" barrel revolver is the Cor-Bon .38 Special +P 125 grain JHP. It is a very high pressure load for a .38 Special and should be used only in modern revolvers specifically rated for +P ammunition. When I carry a 4" .38, I want it loaded with this cartridge. It has less felt recoil and muzzle flip than the #2 choice.
>
> The second-best choice is the .38 Special +P 158 grain lead semi-wadcutter hollow point (LSWCHP) available from Winchester and Remington. Ayoob has found the latter to have the greatest expansion, so I would choose Remington (#R38S12). This unjacketed, all lead HP round (often called the "FBI load" or "Chicago load") is a proven man stopper when fired from a 4" barrel.

Other .38 Special loads for 4" barrel revolvers:

> All major US manufacturers catalog .38 Special +P JHP loads with bullets weighing from 110 to 129 grains. (125 grains is the most common bullet weight.) As far as I know, none of these have yet proven as successful on the street as the Cor-Bon .38 Special +P 125 grain JHP or 158 grain +P LSWCHP, but most are effective loads and worthy of consideration, depending on your situation and requirements.
>
> IMI-Samson offers a lightweight, very high pressure load, the 110 grain +P+ JHP. This is said to be a ballistic duplicate of the law enforcement only "Treasury" load that T-men used to carry.

Noteworthy exotic .38 Special loads:

> The Glaser Safety Slug is a good choice for self-defense in a .38 revolver of any barrel length. (See caveats under "exotic ammunition" above). It is crucial to keep the chambers and frame interior absolutely free of oil or solvents when carrying Glasers, as you don't want any Breakfree CLP or Hoppe's #9 solvent seeping into the primer pocket and deactivating the round. This is important for all rounds, of course, but the Glaser isn't known for particularly good sealing against such mishaps.
>
> You may also want to consider carrying two Glasers as the first rounds to be fired and JHP loads for the rest. This gives you a bit of insurance if your assailant tucks himself behind a sheet rock wall, doorway or some other flimsy cover that JHP rounds can blast through.
>
> PMC makes a bizarre 66 grain tubular hollow bullet load. Some enthusiastic gun-shop salesman may try to sell it to you. Refuse politely.

<u>A Special Note on Snub-Nose .38 Revolvers</u>: The Cor-Bon .38 Special +P 125 grain JHP and 158 grain LSWCHP FBI load are not the best choice for 2" or 3" barrel revolvers. The short barrel does not provide enough velocity to ensure reliable expansion with these loads and the unpleasant and hard-

to-control recoil hurts snub-nose accuracy (as well as your hand). Controllability is crucial and I recommend standard pressure (non +P) loads for any .38 snub-nose. If you carry an aluminum frame, snub nose .38 (e.g. S&W Models 38, 642, 442, 37 or Colt Cobra), I especially urge you to carry a standard pressure (non +P) .38 round.

Standard Pressure (non +P) loads for short barreled revolvers:

> Federal Premium 125 grain NyClad HP (P38MA) - Known as the "Chief's Special" load, this is my preferred 2"-3" barrel snub-nose revolver load and it is the best load for both standard and +P rated snub-nose revolvers. The Nylon-coated hollow point was specifically designed to expand at lower velocities from short barreled .38s. For many years this load was available only to law enforcement agencies, but it is again available to the general public.
>
> Other acceptable standard pressure .38 loads include the Winchester Super-X 110 grain Silvertip, Federal Low Recoil Personal Defense 110 grain Hydra-Shok JHP, Hornady Critical Defense 110 grain FTX and Sig Sauer Elite 125 grain V-Crown.

Loads ONLY for +P rated, 2"-3" barrel revolvers:

> Federal Premium 129 grain +P Hydra-shok JHP
>
> Hornady Critical Defense 110 grain FTX +P
>
> Remington Premier 125 grain Golden Saber +P
>
> Cor-Bon 110 grain +P JHP - I would recommend this high-pressure load only for the sturdy Ruger SP101 and LCR snub-nose .38s, or a .357 Magnum revolver.

If you have a J-frame Smith & Wesson snub-nose .38 (i.e. the five-shot Model 36/37 Chief's Special, Model 38/49/649 Bodyguard, or 640/642/442/940 Centennial), you can greatly improve the controllability of your gun by installing Uncle Mike's "Boot Grip." This is a $14 godsend. The skinny little wooden grips that come on these guns are worthless. Installing good grips does wonders for your ability to control your .38 snub-nose revolver in rapid fire.

9mm Parabellum (9mm Luger, 9x19mm, 9mm NATO)

This is unquestionably the world's most popular pistol round. For this reason it has been the subject of a lot of experimentation. 9mm ball, used by every army in the Western world, is a mediocre man stopper. Jacketed hollow points are a must if one wishes to rely on the 9mm as a defense round. Use ball ammo only for practice.

Civilian 9mm ammunition is generally available in two pressure levels, standard and "+P." (There is also +P+ ammo, usually restricted for police use only.) The +P ammo should only be used in newer guns (made since 1985 or so) and is best used sparingly. 9mm +P loads are generally intended for use in service pistols with 4" or longer barrels.

I will only deal with commercially available ammunition. Civilians should not worry, as there are commercial loads as good as anything restricted to law enforcement usage.

The top rated 9mm Luger load for self-defense is the Cor-Bon 9mm 115 grain +P Jacketed Hollow point. It is the most street-proven man stopper available in this caliber. It is a high velocity (1350 fps) and high pressure round, more effective than loads restricted to law enforcement use.

Unfortunately, it is also likely to jam many older guns. For this reason I add a table at the end of the 9mm section discussing round suitability for different guns. Modern hollow points may either (a) jam, or (b) be too powerful for some older guns. This load is suitable only for First Class pistols (see table).

Here are high performance 9x19mm +P loads worth consideration:

Barnes 115 grain TAC-XPD +P
Cor-Bon 115 grain DPX +P
Cor-Bon 115 grain JHP +P
Hornady Critical Duty 135 grain FlexLock +P
Nosler 124 grain bonded core JHP +P
Nosler 124 grain bonded core Tipped +P
Remington 124 grain Golden Saber BJHP +P
Winchester Defender 124 grain bonded core JHP +P

Good standard pressure 9mm loads include:

Federal Personal Defense 115 grain JHP
Federal 124 grain HST
Federal 147 grain HST
Hornady Critical Defense 115 grain FTX
Remington 147 grain Golden Saber BJHP
Sig Sauer Elite 115 grain V-Crown JHP
Sig Sauer Elite 124 grain V-Crown JHP
Speer 115 grain Gold Dot
Speer 124 grain Gold Dot
Winchester Super-X 147 grain Defend

For guns that may jam with more aggressive hollow point bullets, the Remington 115 grain +P JHP is a good choice (R9MM6). For older guns I would try the Remington standard pressure 115 grain JHP (R9MM1).

Table of 9mm Pistols.

(Note: just because your pistol appears in Class 3 doesn't mean it is unreliable; it may indeed feed hollow points. However, you must fire at least 200 rounds of your chosen JHP carry load to determine if your pistol will feed them properly. I have placed pistols in each category according to reputation and experience. These are only meant as guidelines; your pistol may feed JHP rounds better - or worse - than this table indicates)

First Class pistols are ultra-reliable, high-quality new guns than can feed any hollow point and tolerate +P loads with no problems: All Glocks; all Ruger 9mm pistols; all SIG Sauer 9mm pistols; Czech CZ75 and CZ85; Walther P5, P5C and P88; Heckler and Koch USP and P7 series; Taurus PT-99, PT-92 and PT-92C; Steyr GB; Beretta 92 series; Browning BDM and Hi-Power (if it says "Portugal" on the slide); Smith & Wesson M&P models; Star M28, M30, M31 and all Firestars, Megastars and Ultrastars.

Second Class pistols are guns that may not feed all hollow points reliably. Remington 115 grain hollow points are recommended for these guns: Smith & Wessons with two or three digit model numbers (e.g. 659, 39-2, 469, 59, 39); Heckler and Koch VP70 and P9S; Beretta "Brigadier" M1951; Interarms Helwan; Colt Series 70 Government Model and Series 70 Commander; Astra A-70, A-75 and A-100; AMT On Duty; Daewoo; Bersa Thunder 9; EAA Witness and all other CZ-75 copies (e.g. Tanfoglio, Tanarmi, Springfield Armory P9); Taurus PT-908; Walther P4; Star BK, BKM, Model B and Super; Older Browning Hi-Powers (without the word "Portugal" on the slide); Llama Model 82; IMI Jericho and Kareen.

Third Class pistols should generally be loaded with ball for best reliability; experiment with your gun extensively before carrying JHP: Walther P38, P4 or P1; Luger P-08; Llama; Maverick; MKS Model JS; Intratec CAT-9, DC-9, KG-9, etc.; SWD Cobray Model 11/9 and similar models; Scarab Scorpion; Kimel AP-9; Bryco Jennings Model 59; all KBI Hungarian pistols (e.g. GKK, PJ9C, P9HK and other FEG products); Norinco and Sportarms Chinese Tokarev pistols; Lahti; Radom; MAB P15 and Model 1950.

.357 Magnum

The most effective handgun round on the market, regardless of caliber, is the .357 Magnum 125 grain jacketed hollow point load. This load has more stopping power than any other handgun cartridge and this includes more powerful rounds like the .41 and .44 Magnums.

I advise all experienced revolver men to carry the legendary Federal Personal Defense 125 grain JHP or the equally good Remington 125 grain semi-jacketed hollow point (SJHP) in a .357 revolver. In the same general class are the Cor-Bon 125 grain JHP, Sig Sauer Elite 125 grain V-Crown, Winchester Super-X 125 grain JHP and Hornady Critical Defense 125 grain FTX. All of these are high velocity loads, with muzzle velocities around 1450 fps from a 4" barrel.

If for some reason you think you need deeper penetration, or just favor heavier bullets, Winchester offers a Super-X 145 grain Silvertip load, Hornady offers a Critical Duty 135 grain FlexLock and Federal offers a 130 grain Hydra-Shok in their Personal Defense Low Recoil line. None of these have the street credentials of the various 125 grain JHP loads, but they can definitely get the job done.

There is one caveat, however. These full-power .357 Magnums have a lot of blast and kick. If you are not comfortable with the buck and roar of full-house .357 Magnums, I would strongly suggest that you use a lower-recoil round. Controllability is important and you will be able to fire lower-recoil rounds

more rapidly and accurately. All .357 loads have excellent stopping power, so don't worry that you are giving up too much.

In descending order of severity of recoil (i.e. the Silvertip kicks the most) I recommend the Winchester Super-X Silvertip 145 grain JHP, Remington Golden Saber 125 grain JHP and Winchester 110 grain JHP.

The 110 grain jacketed hollow points by Winchester, CCI and Remington are all good for use in .357 Magnum 2.5" and 3" barrel snub-nose revolvers, such as the S&W Models 66, 19, 65, 13, Colt King Cobra, Ruger GP100 and especially the small-frame Ruger SP101. (Avoid the latter revolver unless you absolutely LOVE punishing recoil.)

If you still find that your .357 kicks too much, carry the Cor-Bon .38 Special+P 110 grain JHP discussed above. Two or three hits with good .38+P slugs beat any number of misses with .357 slugs.

Note: if you are using the factory wood stocks on your S&W or Taurus .357 revolver, you should try a set of rubber replacement grips. Ruger .357 Magnums come factory-equipped with recoil-absorbing rubber grips and I have no idea why S&W and Taurus continue to put wood grips on their .357 revolvers. The difference in control is enormous. Get some good, compact rubber grips from Uncle Mike's or Pachmayr and slap them onto your .357 revolver ASAP.

I used to cringe every time I fired a full-power load in my .357 Magnum snub-nose. Once I put some compact Pachmayr grips on it, however, I had no problem firing the C357B load accurately and rapidly.

To summarize, you can never go wrong with a 110-125 grain .357 jacketed hollow point load from one of the major US ammunition makers. All are great stoppers.

Avoid soft-points, semi-wadcutters, or any of the 158 grain or 180 grain JHP loads; these are for hunting, practice, target or rifle use. Stick to jacketed hollow points under 150 grains in weight. Lead (un-jacketed) bullets are okay for practice, but you will have to spend twice as long cleaning your gun.

.40 Smith & Wesson

This caliber has established an excellent track record on the street. Smith & Wesson and Winchester really hit the mark when they shortened the 10mm Auto case to create the .40 S&W.

The .40 S&W generates snappy recoil, especially in the lighter pistols designed for concealed carry. The 135-155 grain JHP loads generally kick less than the 165-180 grain JHP loads. I would carry the potent Cor-Bon 135 JHP, which appears to be a real stopper, or the Cor-Bon 150 grain JHP.

Here are some high performance .40 S&W loads worthy of consideration:

Barnes 140 grain TAC-XPD
Cor-Bon 135 grain JHP
Cor-Bon 150 grain JHP
Federal 135 grain Guard Dog
Federal 155 grain Tactical Bonded
Federal 155 grain Hydra-Shok

Federal 180 grain HST
Federal 180 grain Hydra-Shok
Hornady Critical Defense 165 grain FTX
Nosler 200 grain bonded JHP
Nosler 200 grain bonded Tipped
Remington 165 grain Golden Saber
Remington 180 grain Golden Saber
Remington 180 grain Golden Saber Bonded
Speer 180 grain Gold Dot
Winchester Defender 165 Grain
Winchester Defender 180 Grain
Winchester 180 Grain Defend
Winchester Ranger 180 grain JHP

In short, you can hardly go wrong with the .40 S&W, unless you carry ball ammo. Choose a good hollow point and stick with it. Leave the ball loads for practice.

.45 ACP (Occasionally called the 11.43x23mm by some silly Europeans)

The .45 ACP is a recognized man stopper and there are a number of excellent loads in this caliber. On the other hand, you must be selective, because the .45 ACP operates at relatively low velocity and many bullet types that perform well in faster calibers, such as 9x19mm and .40 S&W, fail to expand at .45 ACP velocities. (Note: if you are one of those knuckleheads who install light springs in your gun to get a lighter trigger pull, you are asking for reliability problems.)

Here are some of the best standard velocity .45 ACP defense loads:

Cor-Bon 160 grain DPX
Federal Premium 155 grain Hydra-Shok
Federal Premium 165 grain Guard Dog
Federal Premium 180 grain Hydra-Shok
Federal Premium 230 grain HST
Remington Premier 230 grain Golden Saber
Speer 230 grain Gold Dot

Here are some of the best .45 ACP +P defense loads:

Cor-Bon 165 grain JHP +P
Cor-Bon 185 grain JHP +P
Cor-Bon 185 grain DPX +P
Cor-Bon 200 grain JHP +P
Cor-Bon 230 grain JHP +P
Federal Premium 230 grain HST +P

Hornady Custom 230 grain XTP +P
Nosler 230 grain +P bonded core JHP +P
Nosler 230 grain +P bonded core Tipped +P
Remington Premier 185 Golden Saber +P
Speer 200 grain Gold Dot +P

These powerful and hard-kicking +P rounds are best left to the experienced shooter. They are pretty hard on your gun, especially an aluminum-framed pistol like the SIG/Sauer P220 or Colt Lightweight Commander.

If you are sufficiently expert to confidently carry .45 +P loads, you probably don't need my advice. They really sledgehammer the bad guys.

Save the 230 grain ball (FMJ) loads for practice; they are highly over-rated for self defense. Carry FMJ ammo only if you must, because your gun jams with hollow points. The Llama, Federal Ordnance, AMT and Auto-Ordnance M1911A1 copies often jam with anything except 230 grain ball. Never compromise when it comes to reliability: if your gun only feeds ball, then ball is what you carry.

SHOTGUN AMMUNITION BY CALIBER (Gauge)

The shotgun is the *ne plus ultra* of man stoppers. No doubt you have heard a lot of nonsense about the lethality of "assault rifles," sub-machine guns and the like. The fact is that the shotgun is the most effective firearm for short-range personal defense. For example: an Uzi or Heckler & Koch sub-machine gun has about 340 ft. lbs. of impact energy - a 12 gauge shotgun has 2500 to 3100 ft. lbs. of impact energy.

The shotgun is not a magic weapon that will slay all foes. Like all other guns, it must be *aimed* at a specific target. Buckshot loads will not "sweep" a room. "Close" still only counts in horseshoes. Aim your shotgun from the shoulder (like a rifle) if you intend to hit an aggressor.

I invoke the Ascended Master, Massad Ayoob: "It is perhaps the most efficient close-range killing machine in the world's arsenal of small arms." For a discussion of the shotgun's strengths and weaknesses I refer all interested parties to Ayoob's excellent and comprehensive book *The Truth About Self-Protection.* (Truly, the best $8.95 investment you'll ever make.) This addresses every element of self-defense, from locks, chemical sprays and alarms to defensive driving, firearms and defending yourself against dogs.

A more in-depth treatment of the issue may be found in Ayoob's book-length volume on shotgun technique, *Stressfire II: Advanced Combat Shotgun.* Great reading for those who consider a tactical shotgun their primary defensive weapon.

A Note On Shotgun Ammo

Shotgun ammunition falls into three general categories:

BUCKSHOT - A shell loaded with large-diameter lead balls (.24" and up) used for big game hunting and self-defense. The number of pellets in 12 gauge, 2-3/4" (non-magnum) buckshot loads varies from eight .36" balls in #000 buck to 27 .24" pellets in #4 buck. (These figures are for Remington Express shells.) Avoid #000 buckshot loads for most self-defense applications, due to the low pellet count per shell and potentially excessive penetration.

Note that not all buckshot sizes are available in all gauges. The typical options in 12 gauge are numbers 000, 00, 0, 1 and 4. 20 gauge is generally limited to numbers 2 or 3 buck.

The more fragile the walls of your dwelling, the smaller the diameter of buckshot you should use. #00 works well outside and when more penetrations is required (as in police and farm use). #0, #1 and #2 are good for home defense in suburban houses with large yards. #3 and #4 are preferred for urban houses with small yards, mobile homes, duplexes and condos.

Buckshot ratings are archaic and hard to understand (as are shotgun specifications and ammunition in general), but thankfully there isn't much you need to learn. Simply write down the recommended loads, walk into your local gun shop and announce your desired ammunition.

Note that "00" is pronounced "double ought." Don't say "zero zero" or "oh-oh buckshot" in front of gun shop employees. Then, practice with both your selected defense load and low-cost birdshot to fully familiarize yourself with the operation of your gun and its terminal performance (e.g. patterns at various distances, the startling effects of buckshot on melons).

BIRDSHOT- small-diameter pellets used for bird hunting. Its stopping power is poor, except when used at very close range. For that reason it is not generally recommended.

SLUGS - solid lead bullets for shotgun use. These are big, heavy, fat hunks of soft lead that have enormous stopping power. They also have too much penetration for most urban situations, especially in apartment buildings and mobile home parks.

A typical 12 gauge slug is .729" diameter and weighs 438 grains; compare this to a typical 9mm bullet, which is .355" diameter and weighs 124 grains. Slugs must be carefully aimed to be effective, just like a rifle bullet. Actually, shotguns must be carefully aimed and fired with any load, just like handguns and rifles.

12 Gauge

If you simply want to know the best defense load, go out and buy some 12 gauge, 2-3/4" shells loaded with number 1, 0, or 00 buckshot. You shall live happily ever after, as this is the most effective man-stopping firearm cartridge yet devised by man.

I recommend the Federal Vital-Shok, Winchester Super-X or Remington Express loads as the most common and useful buckshot defensive rounds. The content of just one of these 00 shells is almost like a nine-round burst from a submachine gun, with every round hitting.

Effective shotgun technique, of course, requires that one hits with each shot. Don't think that you can merely point the shotgun in the general direction of your attacker and let fly. Read Ayoob's book *Stressfire II: Advanced Combat Shotgun* for the low-down on good shotgun skills and then practice, practice, practice.

Many experienced shooters prefer #4 or #1 buckshot to #00. (Ayoob and many other authorities favor #1.) I really cannot argue, but Lt. Marshall is on record as stating that 00 is superior in penetration. (Obviously, as the heavier a round lead projectile is, the better it penetrates tissue.) #00 is good enough for me, but if your situation suggests #1 or #4 buckshot, go ahead.

Stay away from 2-3/4" Magnum or 3" Magnum loads, however. The brutal kick of these rounds makes them a bad choice and you gain little in stopping power over the 2-3/4" standard loads. Controllability is important, and standard 12 gauge shells have quite enough kick as it is.

A note on shotgun spread: firing your shotgun does not create a diabolical cone of doom destroying all in its path. If you have a typical tactical or riot gun with an 18"-20" Cylinder bore barrel, the pellets will spread out about 1" for every yard of range. This means that the spread of pellets fired across a large room (18') will be 6" or so, a circle the size of a coffee cup saucer. At 50 feet, the spread will be the size of a large pizza (16").

Test-fire your shotgun at various ranges, using big white butcher paper targets to get an idea of the pattern you can expect. It is a common misconception that blasting at foes ten feet away will take out two or three of them. The spread at that range is just three inches, so you can see that I meant it when I said a shotgun must be skillfully aimed and fired, just like handguns and rifles. The shotgun is simply more likely to stop the attacker.

Slugs are potent man stoppers, but have limited application for self-defense. Slugs have ferocious recoil and often over-penetrate. There are special situations where slugs might be preferred over buckshot (e.g. road-blocks, barricaded foes), but if you are interested in such esoterica I again direct you to Ayoob's masterful tome *Stressfire II: Advanced Combat Shotgun.* This guide is for civilian readers.

Don't be a knucklehead. Stay away from weirdo rounds like rubber buckshot or neoprene slugs. These are riot-control rounds designed for non-lethal, massed police use against mobs at a distance. Don't rely on such marginalia to save your life.

Two things to keep in mind about birdshot. The first is that birdshot is as lethal as buckshot at very close range and ineffectual at longer range. Birdshot is less likely to penetrate multiple interior walls and kill innocent people on the other side and generally has lower recoil than buckshot for faster follow-up shots.

I live in a thin-walled apartment house, which makes birdshot a viable alternative. However, if I lived in a solid house with a decent size yard, I would definitely choose buckshot.

The stopping power of birdshot should not be under estimated. At typical indoor ranges of 10 or 15 feet, birdshot is virtually a solid column of lead. Choose any 2-3/4" high brass (non-magnum) shell with 1-1/4 ounce of #4 lead shot. These are called "pheasant loads" (Winchester and Remington) or "Upland loads" (Federal). The muzzle velocity is 1220 fps (Winchester) or 1330 fps (Federal and Remington). I like the Winchester version for its lighter recoil. There is little terminal difference between the various brands; buy whichever you please.

Don't believe for a second that you can just wound someone with birdshot and he'll go on to live another day. If you aren't justified in killing a man, you aren't justified in wounding him, either.

RIFLE AMMUNITION BY CALIBER

Rifles aren't a great choice for most self-defense applications. Quoth Ayoob: "The rifle is not well suited to the sudden, close-quarters deployment and maneuvering that is required of a defensive firearm. On the battlefield, yes. In civilian close combat, no way."

Ayoob adds that "the rifle is too bulky for maneuvering through doors and hallways, too long to quickly and surreptitiously pick up when the attacker drops his guard, and too easy for the criminal to take away if the homeowner's attention is diverted."

That being said, if all you have is a rifle, then a rifle is what you use. Some liberal-infested cities ban handgun ownership (Chicago, New York, Detroit, DC), so you are stuck using shotguns and rifles for home defense.

Take some comfort from the fact that rifles have better stopping power, are a strong visual deterrent and are much easier to hit with than any handgun. On a ranch or farm a rifle may be quite appropriate under certain circumstances today, just as it was on the frontier. Never use ball (FMJ) ammo for self-defense in a rifle.

.22 Long Rifle

A good .22 autoloading, pump, or lever action rifle, such as the Ruger 10/22 (auto), Remington Model 572 (pump), or Henry Golden Boy (lever), can do the job when nothing else is available. Use any high-velocity or hyper-velocity, copper-plated HP round (CCI Stinger, Remington Yellow Jacket, etc.) and fire repeatedly. Multiple hits are crucial with a .22. Shoot and shoot and shoot some more.

Stay away from the aftermarket large capacity magazines made by Ram-Line, Eagle, Hot Lips, etc. These plastic nightmares are unreliable, jam-prone and easily breakable.

.22 Magnum (.22 WMR)

Use a 40 grain jacketed hollow point load. Try the Winchester Super-X 40 grain JHP, CCI Maxi-Mag 40 grain JHP, or Remington 40 grain JHP.

.223 Remington (5.56x45mm NATO)

This is the standard NATO rifle round and one of the best choices for a self-defense rifle. Many top notch rifles are (or were) available in this caliber: the Colt AR-15, Ruger Mini-14, Steyr AUG, FN FNC, et cetera.

All .223 hollow point, soft point and plastic tipped varmint bullets are good stoppers in civilian frontal shootings. These are usually in the 40-60 grain range. 55 grain bullets are the most popular weight and offered in the most loads, so consider that a clue. Nosler specifically recommends their 64 grain Bonded Solid Base soft point load for personal defense.

Avoid the heavy soft point bullets sold for hunting Class 2 game (hogs, deer and antelope). Save ball ammo for practice, as its stopping power is very unreliable.

Note: .223 rifles with a 1 in 12" rifling twist shoot more accurately with 35-60 grain bullets, as this is the bullet weight range for which they were designed. Rifles with a fast 1 in 7" twist (this includes the AR-15A2 and nearly all European models) prefer 55-75 grain bullets. Other .223/5.56mm barrels may have 1 in 8" or 1 in 9" twists. Ruger Mini-14 rifles have a 1 in 10" twist and do well with most any bullet weight up to 70 grains. They all adequately handle 55 grain bullets. Twist rate is only important at longer ranges, in any case.

.30-06 Springfield

This excellent and time-proven cartridge has too many top-notch loads to list. Choose the same bullets mentioned in connection with the .308 Winchester (above) in lever action, pump, or autoloading carbines. As with the .308, the biggest concern is over penetration in populated areas.

.357 Magnum

This is the best of the self-defense handgun cartridges available in carbines and superior to the .30 Carbine cartridge. See the ammunition guidelines for revolvers, above, but avoid bullets lighter than 125 grains and Glasers or other exotic bullets.

The heavier 140-158 grain JHP bullets may shoot more accurately than lighter bullets in carbines. This is okay, as the carbine's higher velocity will cause more bullet expansion on impact.

For example, .38 Special +P 125 grain JHP loads fired from an 20" carbine barrel will hit as hard as full power magnums fired from a service revolver's 4" or 6" barrel. The Winchester Super-X 158 grain JHP factory load has a MV of 1830 fps and ME of 1175 ft. lbs. per the Winchester catalog.

The .357 makes an excellent self-defense round in Marlin, Henry, Uberti and Winchester lever actions, or the Action Arms/Israeli Military Industries "Timber Wolf" .357 pump action carbine. The recoil of full power .357 Magnum loads is very mild in a carbine.

.44 Magnum

Pick any good hollow point, using the guidelines for revolvers. Winchester figures quote a MV of 1760 fps and ME of 1650 ft. lbs. for the Super-X 240 grain JHP factory load from a 20" barrel. Don't be tempted to use soft points; these hunting rounds will blow right through your foe and anyone standing behind him. .44 Magnum recoil in a carbine is much more than a .357 Magnum, about like a .30-30.

THE END