

Pistol Selection

People interested in getting their first defensive handgun may be a bit overcome when they walk into a gun store and look at the vast assortment of handguns that are available today. Further, they can easily become confused by the advice, well-meaning though it may be, offered by the clerk behind the counter. These folks should understand that many of us who have carried defensive handguns for years have tried an assortment of different guns before settling on what works best for us. Here are some ideas that might help these new folks shorten their search for the defensive handgun that suits them best.

- 1. The pistol should fit your hand.** You should be able to grip the handgun so that it is centered in the web between your thumb and index finger. The barrel and top edge of the pistol should be in a straight line with your wrist and forearm. When the pistol is in this position, your trigger (index) finger should be able to easily rest on the face of the trigger. This not only allows for a sure grip on the pistol, but it also is an aid in accurate shooting. Remember, not everyone wears the same size shoes and the same size pants. We are all build a little differently. Therefore the gun that fits my hand and my purpose, may not necessarily be the pistol that fits someone else. Don't be misguided by listening to some "Mall Ninja" or "Tommy Tactical" who wants to stroke his ego at your expense by pontificating about why his gun is the best. While it may fit him, if he doesn't seek to fit the gun to the potential buyer, he is not looking after your best interests.
- 2. The pistol should fit the purpose.** Why are you purchasing this pistol? What is its purpose? The ideal pistol for concealed carry will be small, easily concealed. Unfortunately these small guns are not easy to shoot and produce much more recoil than their larger counterparts. The larger pistols are harder to conceal, especially in the warm weather months when wearing a coat, jacket or other cover garment may not only be uncomfortable, but bring undue attention. The ideal gun for target shooting is a medium to large barrel and probably chambered in .22 LR. This ideal target gun is the opposite of an ideal concealed carry gun for defensive purposes.

Some pistol models can fill multiple roles while others are specialized for certain tasks. Are you looking for a pistol that will be carried concealed on a daily basis or to be stored in a lock box near the bed for home defense? Will it be used for plinking at tin cans or does it need to have competition-grade features and accuracy? If it's a revolver for hunting, should it be chambered for ammunition that's appropriate for small, medium or large game? Having a clear idea of how a pistol will be used most of the time will serve to narrow the options down to a reasonable number and help the sales staff of your local gun store to understand which models best fit your need.

- 3. The controls on the pistol should be easy to reach** and in what, for you, is a logical position. This is important because, with practice, the defensive shooter must be able to operate those controls virtually without looking at them. Attention will be on the threat and the operation of the defensive handgun should be second nature. All your skills need to be gross motor skills. Make certain you test fire the model you select BEFORE your purchase. Not every dealer has a range available. It is very common to like the feel of a gun on the showroom and feel completely uncomfortable shooting that same gun. Take it for a "test drive" before you buy – no exceptions!!

The shooting community is rife with opinions (many of which are conflicting) as to which are the "best" pistols and the "right" calibers to own. In truth, what feels like a good fit to one gun buyer may be a poor fit to someone else. One of the primary reasons for all of this debate is differences in each shooter's hand shape, size and strength. Small and svelte grips feel awkward in big hands while chunky grips feel

awkward in smaller ones. The controls, like the magazine release and external safety (if equipped), may be too widely spaced to be manipulated, or may be rubbing up against a knuckle because they are too close together.

Gun-to-hand compatibility is also an important factor in managing felt recoil. A poor grip fit can result in a shooter's hands feeling tired or sore in a short period of time. So trust what your hands tell you. If a pistol feels lousy or is hard to operate in the gun shop, it's not going to feel or run any better on the shooting range. The best way to avoid grip and control fit problems is to go to a range that rents guns and try before you buy.

4. **Some guns have several external safety devices, some guns don't have any.** Some guns are effectively carried with the hammer cocked and the safety on, others have the hammer down. Some guns don't have a visible hammer. If a particular style doesn't seem safe to you, don't buy it. With practice and experience, you may change your mind at a later date, but there is no reason to start out with a pistol that makes you nervous. I would quickly point out that all quality-made pistols can be carried and operated safely. The operator (that is you) must know how to do this with a particular type of pistol and must have confidence in that ability.
5. **The final test is in the actual shooting of the prospective defensive purchase.** If the pistol really fits you, you should be able to learn to draw it quickly, get on target quickly and deliver accurate shots to the target. When fighting for your life, it is likely that you will have to fire multiple shots at the attacker. For this reason, the gun should be of a caliber and weight that allows you to manage the recoil and quickly get back on target. It also needs to be a defensive caliber. For revolvers, minimum defensive caliber is .38 Special/.357 magnum; for semi-autos, 9x19 is the minimum defensive caliber.
6. **Shop Around for the Best Price.** When the right pistol for your needs is in stock at your local gun store, how do you know if you're getting a good deal? The internet makes price checking a much easier process than it used to be. Start by finding the manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP) on the company website. This posted price is usually a little higher than what most dealers will charge for new merchandise. If a gun's price tag is marked with a dollar amount that's the same or higher than the MSRP, then there is a good chance you can find a better deal elsewhere. The exception to the MSRP rule of thumb is when there is a high demand for a particular model (as there was for AR-15s for a couple of years). In cases like this, plan on seeing prices that are higher, sometimes much higher than MSRP.

A quick and easy way to price check is to visit firearm sales websites like GunBroker.com, GunsAmerica.com and AuctionArms.com. These sites feature new and used firearms sold by individuals and retailers. Run a search for the model you have in mind to see a full range of prices from around the country. An important thing to remember with online pricing is that the numbers shown at the top of the listing may not include the shipping and transfer fees shown at the bottom of the listing. If adding up all the costs brings the price of an online purchase close to that of your local store, then you might as well buy locally and help keep your home town store up and running. Most dealers will match pricing from other brick and mortar stores.

It would be nice if it were simple enough to be able to call up the local gun shop and say, "I'm 5-foot, 8-inches tall, weigh 155 pounds and am 32 years old. What kind of defensive handgun should I get?" Sadly, that is not the case. We often have to try a number of defensive systems before we find what really suits us. Just stay with quality and avoid the fads. What is currently popular is of no concern if it doesn't fit you and meet your needs.

Avoid 'Mystery Metal' Pistols and Knockoffs. There is a tremendous temptation to save as much money as possible when buying a gun because, let's face it, they are expensive. But even though they can seem like a good deal at the time, cheaply constructed knock-offs with strange names and components constructed of unidentifiable metals are rarely a good investment. For example, an associate of mine picked up a little pocket semi-auto that looked just like a better-known name-brand version. I hadn't heard of the manufacturer before, so I looked up the company online. It took some digging to find out that the small caliber pistol in question was a collector's item, though not in a good way. The company only produced about 5,000 guns before going out of business because their pistol frames demonstrated a tendency to chip and crack in a most inconvenient manner. So now he owns an interesting piece of shooting industry history that is of no practical use to him. There is one well known company that specializes in making attractive copies of quality manufacturer's guns. They look great,

but do you want to have your life depend on a half-price knock-off? Always do your homework before laying down cash for a gun.

Your search for a defensive handgun is definitely not going to be boring. Along the way, you'll shoot some great guns, meet some of the greatest people in the US and come away with a fond appreciation for the shooting sports. Remember the transactions regretted most are those that were made in haste. If you are in a hurry, remember that the deal of the century happens every day. Patience and pre-purchase preparation will pay dividends more often than packing your quick-draw wallet to the gun store. There will always be another good deal or a better buy, but it's an expensive proposition to un-buy a gun you don't like. Think of the car that depreciates 50% when driven off the dealer's lot. If you want to trade it in after you've shot the gun, figure, at best, you will get 50% of your purchase price on a trade, probably much less.

Keep the same thought process in mind when purchasing a holster. Don't fall for some cheap nylon one-size-fits-all bargain you find. Get a quality holster that is made for your pistol model. It will probably run you about 20% of the price of the pistol. Since the holster secures the pistol on your body, make sure it fits. The fit will be equal to the comfort factor. If it doesn't fit, you will be fidgeting, adjusting and squirming. They you will give up after declaring it uncomfortable. Now your emergency equipment is left at home. Your assailant may not be willing to make an appointment to come back when you are prepared for his attack!

For a "new in box" personal defense handgun that follows these guidelines, you should be spending less than \$600. Keep in mind that you will need to purchase spare magazines, a good holster (or two), both defensive and practice ammunition, and possibly invest in professional training to go along with your purchase. You should still be able to purchase everything you need for under \$1,000:

- Defensive Firearm: \$500 – \$600
- Holster: \$50 – \$75
- Spare Magazines: \$50 each
- Defensive Ammo: \$75 – \$100 (reliability testing and two to three magazines for carry)
 - 9x19 Defensive ammo is usually \$1 per cartridge
- Practice Ammo: \$100 (minimum!)
 - 9x19 practice/range ammo is around \$.40 per cartridge
- Training: Varies (books and DVDs, CCW permit, in person defensive training)

Aesthetics do play a role. If you like your gun, you are more likely to carry and practice with it. However, I caution you strongly to make this the very last factor you use to determine which gun you will count on to save yours (or your family's) life in a worst-case scenario.

Good shopping and good luck.



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