

The Caliber of Your Protection; What You Need to Stop Different Rounds

As the body armor industry continues to develop and research new materials to be used in protective clothing, body armor becomes more and more protective, while also getting lighter and thinner. This means that there are more choices than ever before, and vests are easier to wear and far more protective than they used to be. Of course, this choice can make the decision to buy body armor harder, and it is important to understand the options available.

Body armor refers to a wide range of protective items, all of which can be split along a number of lines. For example, vests are available in different styles, depending on how they will be worn, and most are available with any number of optional extras, such as high-visibility covers or logos and insignia. However, the most important distinction to understand is the various levels of protection that body armor is available at. Put simply, this refers to the amount of protection the vest can offer.

‘Soft Armor’

Ballistic protection is standardized according to testing standards set by the National Institute of Justice, the world-leader in ballistics testing. This organization then assigns levels (NIJ Levels), so you can easily see at a glance what ammunition each level of vest can protect against.

‘Soft Armor’ refers to body armor that uses Kevlar and similar materials to offer ballistic protection. While ‘Hard Armor’ will also utilize these materials, it requires additional rigid plates, whereas soft armor uses only the lightweight and flexible ballistic protection afforded by fabrics like Kevlar. Soft armor is available up to and including NIJ Level IIIa, which not only provides the protection offered by lower levels, but can also protect against high velocity 9mm full metal jacketed round nose bullets, as well as .44 Magnum jacketed hollow points.

Each level of protection can stop the ammunition listed at lower levels. Level IIa armor is considered the minimum recommended protection for all armor, and is capable of protecting against 9mm full metal jacketed round nose and .40 S&W full metal jacketed ammunition, which are commonly found in most handguns. Even this ‘basic level’ is capable of protecting against a wide variety of rounds, with 10mm Auto, .357 SIG, and even .45 ACP rounds all covered by this level of protection. The Level II armor, conversely, can protect against all this as .357 Magnum jacketed soft points and the 9mm Parabellum fired at higher speeds. As mentioned above, however, the 9mm fired from a semi-automatic will require Level IIIa armor.

‘Hard Armor’

Unlike soft armor, ‘Hard Armor’ will be heavier and far less flexible due to the rigid plates it requires. Most higher level vests will consist of a [Kevlar vest](#) and an additional rigid plate, usually made of

ceramics and/or polyethylene, which provides much stronger protection at the cost of weight and flexibility.

Hard Armor is available at NIJ Level III and IV, which is the highest available level of ballistic protection. Level III hard armor protects against 7.62mmx51mm NATO full metal jacketed rifle rounds, as well as the 5.56x45mm NATO round. Most rifle and automatic rounds are covered by the Level III, including such staples as the .30-06 and the .308 Winchester. However, the highest level of protection, the Level IV, offers protection against all these bullets, as well as armor-piercing variants.

These hard armors are harder and heavier than their soft counterparts, and yet advancements in material technologies mean that Level III and IV protection can be achieved even in a covert vest. Many bullet resistant vests are now available in covert styles with the capability of housing additional Level III or IV plates, meaning you can have protection against more powerful weapons in a discreet package.

For more information on the ballistic protection of bullet proof vests, see [the NIJ's Official Documentation](#) regarding testing and grading.