

Which Baby Carrier Should I Get?

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Parents and caregivers new to babywearing usually start with the question, “Which baby carrier should I get?” It seems like a simple question, one that could be answered by reading consumer reviews and asking one’s friends – just like selecting a carseat or high chair. And some people do, in fact, pick a carrier, use it sometimes for convenience, and never really think about it again. But babywearing is about more than a product choice. The practice of “wearing” your baby is a healthy habit you can get into and a skill that you can learn – one that you can use regardless of which particular sling, wrap or other carrier you happen to be wearing at any given moment. Baby carriers can be more like clothing accessories than they are like baby gear – you wear them, after all – and when you understand *how* to babywear, almost anything can become a baby carrier. (Beach towels and tablecloths are favorites, but that’s only the beginning!)

However, because the question of “which carrier?” arises so often, and there are so many different “right” answers, this article is an attempt to guide you in choosing your babywearing tools.

Firstly, you almost certainly need more than *one* baby carrier, for essentially the same reasons that you need more than one pair of shoes. Different things work best for different situations and different purposes. Two or three of different types is a good minimalist collection, and – depending on your lifestyle and budget – accumulating 20 or so by the time your baby is crawling isn’t at all outrageous!

Secondly, there is a lot of information to assimilate when choosing a carrier, because there are a lot of choices! It can be overwhelming. If it begins to seem like it’s all just too much, take a deep breath and relax. Pick a carrier type first. And then choose the brand and model based on a color or print that appeals to you, or buy the first one you happen to find that sounds good, or whatever is recommended to you by a friend or relative. If whatever you end up with doesn’t turn out to be perfect, that’s okay; you can return or re-sell it and try something else. The worst choice to make is to have no carrier at all!

In this article, I outline some of the best choices of carrier type for wearing babies of various ages in various positions, outline the pros and cons of the most popular types of baby carriers, mention some of the key differences between brands or type within a category and give some examples of well-regarded brands. This information should help you decide where to start. But keep in mind that carrier fit and usage is subject to very individual preferences, so what worked for me – or for your sister or your neighbor – may not work as well for you. Also, new carrier brands and vendors come onto the market all the time while other makers go out of business, and existing carriers get redesigned in ways that usually appeal to some wearers but not others. The best way to really narrow down your choices and select a particular carrier is to try on some different things. This you can do for free by attending any Babywearing International meeting! BWI of the Bay Area has other resources as well, including a carrier lending library; for more information on that please join our Yahoo group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/babywearinginternational-bayarea/>. (If you live somewhere other than the San Francisco Bay Area, please look for a BWI or other babywearing group near you; helpful websites are listed in the Resources section below.)

Babywearing International does not sell slings and does not recommend specific brands or vendors. Opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, who is an experienced babywearer but who does not have detailed knowledge about every available brand or carrier. The omission of any given brand name does not imply there is anything wrong with it!



Many types of baby carrier are fairly easy to make yourself, especially if you can sew. If you are interested in the “do it yourself” option, there are a number of other resources to which we can direct you.

Best Carriers by Baby’s Age

For the newborn phase (birth through 3 months) the best choices are a wrap (stretchy or woven), a ring sling, a stretchy and/or adjustable pouch, or any combination thereof. A wrap or a ring sling provides the best support and offers you the most flexibility of positioning for a baby who cannot reliably hold his own head up yet, let alone sit up, while a pouch can be a bit easier to use. You’ll probably want at least two carriers, if for no other reason than to have one to wear when the other’s in the wash! Spit-up and diaper leaks are just a fact of life at this stage.



For the “middle infant” phase and early toddlerhood (about 3 months through about 14 months) you’ll want a mei tai or other Asian-style carrier, a buckle carrier, or a woven wrap, or any combination of the above, *and* one or both of a ring sling and pouch. Which type you use at any given time depends on the situation. For short carries, while running errands and getting in and out of the car frequently or for social occasions when friends and relations want to play pass-the-baby, a one-shoulder carrier (ring sling, pouch or shorty wrap) is the



most convenient. For naptimes or all-day outings, with a heavier and more active baby, you will need the wider weight distribution and greater security offered by a two-shoulder carrier (Asian-style, buckle or long wrap). Other considerations will affect which particular style within those categories is best suited for a given wearer and a given purpose.

In toddlerhood through preschool age, a woven wrap or a soft structured carrier gets the most use – though most babywearers will still occasionally use their ring sling or pouch. Some wearers who prefer a mei tai or unstructured buckle tai may still use that rather than a soft structured carrier, but



might find they need a toddler-specific version or brand that is designed to support the older child’s greater weight and longer torso. Likewise, those who enjoy using ring slings may wish to replace their former favorites with a more supportive type.

Best Carriers by Carry Position

Some babies are pretty happy to be held in just about any position, while others are pickier. And sometimes your choice of carrier is driven by what you'll be doing while babywearing; for example, the best positions for breastfeeding in a carrier are different from the best positions for cooking dinner. The most common positions are listed below with a brief description of what carriers are best for each. There are other positions and variations not described here, and it is worth noting that a long wrap is the carrier type that offers the most flexibility of positioning, with a ring sling as a close second.

Cradle and reverse cradle; semireclined. To hold a baby lying or sitting across your body in a cradled position, use a pouch, ring sling, or wrap. Asian-style and buckle carriers are not well suited to these “sideways” holds. This is a favored position for breast- or bottle-feeding, and for a smaller baby when relaxed or sleeping. However, some newborns dislike cradle positions intensely, especially the most enclosed, horizontal versions in a deep pouch. A semireclined version, with a newborn, is easiest to achieve with a ring sling, but may also be done with a wrap or pouch.

Snuggle or tummy-to-tummy. To hold a baby against your chest, snuggled against you in an upright position (sometimes called “hug hold” or “heart to heart”), use a ring sling, wrap, Asian-style or buckle carrier. For a baby old enough to help hold himself up, you can also use a pouch. If you are moving around much (brisk walking, cleaning, etc.), this position will be more secure in a two-shoulder carrier (long wrap, Asian-style or buckle carrier) than in a one-shoulder (pouch, ring sling, rebozo/short wrap). Among buckle carriers, a buckle tai with an unpadded or lightly padded waist is likely to be much more comfortable for front carries than is a soft structured carrier with a firmly padded hip belt.

Front facing out (kangaroo or buddha). To carry a baby facing forward with her back leaning against your chest, use a pouch, ring sling, or wrap, or a brand/style of mei tai or buckle carrier that is suited to this position (many are not). With a pouch or ring sling, the baby's legs will be tucked inside the carrier, so this works best with smaller infants. With a wrap, mei tai or buckle carrier, the baby's legs can be in or out; however, **if you wear a baby facing forward with legs out, you must be very careful to properly position the baby's back and legs, to avoid stress on the spine and joints.** Make sure the carrier you choose provides support for the baby's hips and thighs, rather than holding him only by the crotch, and allows him to lean comfortably against you with knees bent up in a natural “seated” position, instead of dangling forward with back arched and legs hanging down.

Hip carry. To hold a baby on your hip, the best choices are a pouch, ring sling, dedicated hip carrier, or wrap. (A ring sling or wrap is best if the baby does not sit up alone yet.) You can also use a mei tai, and some buckle carriers (other than hip carriers) can be used in this position; however, these are not generally the most comfortable or easiest to use for a hip carry. If you want to be able to shift easily between a regular hip carry and a rear hip carry (baby's head behind your arm), a ring sling or pouch is the best bet; a wrap can also work.

Back carry. To wear a baby on your back, the best choices are the two-shoulder carriers: woven wrap, Asian-style or buckle carriers. (A stretchy wrap is *not* a good choice; back carrying with a stretchy is usually unsafe!) With a cooperative toddler or older baby, you can also use a ring sling or pouch. A soft structured carrier or woven wrap tends to be the most comfortable with an older, heavier baby (toddler and up). For a high back carry (where the baby's rear is above your waist and she can see over your shoulder), you'll want a wrap, Asian style or unstructured buckle tai, because the firm hip belt of a soft structured carrier won't work as well when worn above your waist. Frame packs are worth considering if you want a high back carry with the weight still on your hips, but they are best suited for serious hiking or all-day outdoor events, and not for everyday around-the-house or running-errands use.

(See photos throughout for examples of different carry positions in various carrier types.)

Summary of Carrier Types

In general, some types of baby carrier are very versatile, adjustable, and comfortable, and some are very quick, convenient, and easy to learn to use. Most of the time, there is an inverse relationship between those two sets of considerations! The most adjustable carrier can be harder to learn to use, because you must figure out how to properly adjust it. The most convenient carrier can be frustratingly impossible to adjust; either it fits comfortably, or it doesn't. This is an oversimplification to some extent, but an important thing to keep in mind because you will probably find that no one style of carrier will be the best at everything. You will need to determine which type offers the best compromise for your needs.

Pouch. A pouch is a loop of fabric that you wear over one shoulder, crossing your torso from shoulder to hip. There's a curved seam that creates a seat for the baby. These are easy to learn to use, very fast to get on and off, convenient to carry around because they're compact, and very "poppable," meaning it's easy to "pop" the baby in and out. However, a really good fit is critical – the pouch will be uncomfortable for you and baby and may even be unsafe if it doesn't fit well – and a post-partum mother's pouch size can change rapidly due to weight loss and changes in breast size. Most people find it takes some trial and error to determine the correct pouch size. Adjustable pouches (which can be set to a range of sizes using a set of snaps, zippers or other fasteners, but are not adjusted while wearing) can solve some of that problem but may not adjust in a wide enough range to be shared among different wearers, and you lose certain wearing options when you add fasteners to the shoulder. Also, it's difficult to impossible to wear a newborn in a pouch in any position other than cradle, which many babies simply dislike. Even with an older baby, because a pouch is worn across one shoulder, and isn't very adjustable, it tends to be less comfortable than a carrier that spreads the weight more widely and less secure than one you can tighten.



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The most significant differences between various pouches are the depth – a function of the width of the fabric and the shape of the seam – and the type of fabric. Also, some have a padded rail (the edge of the fabric) to cushion a newborn's head or the underside of a toddler's knees, while others are unpadded. For adjustable pouches, there are also various ways of changing the size. A stretchy fabric, such as fleece, will make the pouch soft and snuggly for a little baby and easier to use, but may not provide sufficient support for a larger, older baby. Fabrics with some give, such as a cotton blend with a bit of Lycra, are usually a good choice. The pouch you'll most often see in brick-and-mortar stores is the New Native, but that is not necessarily the best example of the type. Peanut Shell, Hotsling, Karma Baby, Slingings, Mamma's Milk, and Kangaroo Korner are some oft-recommended brands.

The most common error in choosing a pouch is to buy too large a size. Remember that you want to wear your baby "high and snug." When determining your "shoulder to hip" measurement (on which pouch sizing is based), keep the tape at the *top* of your hip – where you would naturally carry a seated baby – and not at the widest part as you do for clothing measurements.

Ring sling. A ring sling is a length of fabric with two rings sewn into one end and the free end threaded through the rings, rather like a D-ring belt. The loop of fabric thus created is worn from shoulder to hip, and the sling is adjusted by pulling the “tail” through the rings. Ring slings are incredibly versatile, poppable, beautiful and really wonderful for breastfeeding in, and not too hard to learn. They’re nearly as compact and convenient as pouches but more comfortable and allow for carrying any age child in many different positions. But there is a learning curve to them – you have to be willing to put in some time at first to figure them out – and, because it spreads across only one shoulder and the back, as the baby gets older, it may be less comfortable and less secure than a carrier which distributes the weight across both shoulders and to the waist or hips.



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Many people struggle with heavily padded, closed tail slings (like the Over The Shoulder Baby Holder, SlingEzee or Nojo) because they are difficult to adjust, bulky and frequently ill-fitting; they are very different from a lightly padded or unpadded open-tail slings. But if you have a properly-sized closed-tail sling, you can use it as you would an adjustable pouch. Any ring sling with rail padding does have to be the right size for you, but light padding gives the sling a little more structure and can make it a little easier to learn to use. However, most wearers ultimately prefer unpadded slings for the more streamlined look and feel, and because there are just many more choices of unpadded. With unpadded slings, although there are many other things you may want to consider (fabric, ring type, tail length, etc.) the main difference between different brands is the “shoulder style” – the way the fabric is gathered or pleated through the rings. Shoulder style comfort is a very individual thing, but in general, there are variations in the width of the fabric which affect how widely the weight is distributed, variations in ease of use and variations in adjustability.

Good “first sling” choices that are also popular among more experienced sling wearers include Sleeping Baby Productions and Maya Wrap Lightly Padded (which has shoulder padding but no rail padding). Both of these slings offer medium-width shoulders that are easy to use and require little or no adjusting. The “original” style of Maya, however, has a much trickier shoulder style that most people don’t find as comfortable. Another popular style for ease of use is the UpMama sling/pouch hybrid. There are many other great brands with other shoulder styles, in a very wide price range, including Taylormade, Zolowear, Sakura Bloom, Kalea Baby and Pslings (unpadded), EllaRoo and Posh Papoose (lightly padded).

Wrap. A wrap, or wraparound carrier, is really just any long piece of fabric, though the brand-name wraps are made from fabrics designed for comfort and support, and with various other features that make them particularly suited for baby carrying. A wrap can be worn in an endless variety of different ways and can hold a baby in almost any position you can imagine. It can be very, very secure and very, very comfortable. However, it can also be rather difficult to learn to use, and getting a wrap on and off takes more time and effort than any other type of carrier. Wraps also tend to be hot, though this isn’t universally true.



There are two basic types of wrap: stretchy and woven. Stretchy wraps are more forgiving and a lot easier to use than wovens, and they make it easy to pop the baby in and out so you don’t have to be constantly unwrapping and rewrapping the carrier. So they’re really good for new parents with little babies. The downside is that they’re not great for older babies and not as versatile because the stretchy fabric doesn’t provide enough support. By the time your baby is about 20 lbs you need to switch to a woven or a different type of carrier. The Moby Wrap, Hug a Bub and Sleepy Wrap are good examples of stretchy wrap, and the Moby is

widely available and inexpensive. The Ultimate Baby Wrap (sold at Babies R Us and similar mass merchandisers) is not recommended by most who've tried it; it is *too* stretchy and therefore isn't as comfortable and has an even more limited useful life. There are also hybrid or "semi stretchy" wraps which fall in between the typical stretchy and the woven wraps as far as ease of use and support. A popular example is the Wrapsody Bali Baby Stretch.

Woven wraps are the only type of carrier that is truly an excellent choice for wearing children of every age from birth through kindergarten. They do have the longest learning curve of any carrier type, especially for back carries, but you can become an expert at just one or two front carry ties in about the same amount of time as you might learn to use a ring sling or mei tai. Popular brands include Didymos, Storchenwiege, Hoppediz, Girasol, Ellaroo, and Wrapsody (formerly GypsyMama). Wraps made of heavier fabrics tend to be a bit easier to use, while thinner ones require more skill to wear comfortably but are better for hot weather. There are also more subtle differences in feel between different weaves and patterns, and you can choose different lengths depending on the type of carries you want to do and your own body size. "Shorties" and shawl slings (rebozos, pareos and similar traditional cloth carriers) under 4 meters long are a bit quicker and more poppable, like pouches and ring slings, while long wraps between 4 and 5.5 meters are more versatile and comfortable.

Wrap/pouch hybrid or crossed slings. There are a few carriers designed to have the comfort and security of a wrap, but with the on-and-off ease of a pouch. These consist basically of two loops of fabric – sometimes sewn together and sometimes separate, and some have an additional support "sash" – that you wear one on each shoulder. The baby is carried in the middle where the two loops cross. These can be a great choice for a newborn, especially one who is very picky about positioning, but as most of them are stretchy (like a stretchy wrap), they usually aren't supportive enough beyond about 20 lbs. Examples: Baby K'tan, Loopi, Baby Buddha, Beco Obi, Cashmere Cuddles. You can achieve essentially the same effect with any two pouches or ring slings; the MamaBaby stretchy ring slings (sold by Maya Wrap) are designed to be worn this way.

Mei tai and other Asian-style baby carriers. The mei tai is the most popular of the Asian-style carriers, all of which are basically a rectangular-ish panel of fabric with straps. The baby sits in the body panel and the straps are tied around the wearer. A mei tai has four straps, two short ones that go around your waist and two long ones that go over your shoulders and wrap around you and the baby. Mei tais are really comfortable for "middle size" babies and young toddlers (~2-14 months), very secure and often very pretty. Front carries are pretty easy to learn; back carries are harder but easier than with a wrap. They're faster to put on than a wrap but slower than a ring sling or pouch. They're not as well suited as a wrap or ring sling for a newborn, generally, because they don't offer as much versatility of positioning, but they are very adjustable in fit and offer the best balance of comfort for doing both front and back carries.



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Mei tais vary in body panel size and shape; strap angle, placement, size and padding; fabric type; hood or headrest design; and a myriad of other features and details. Unfortunately it is difficult to predict which brand or style will be most comfortable for a given person, although you might be drawn to either a large-body or small-body type based on the wearer's body size, the baby's size and the baby's habits (a snuggler vs. a kicker). Some well-regarded examples include Kozy, Babyhawk, Mei Tai Baby, Freehand, Sachi, Ball Baby Overall, Silly Goose, MOM Tai, Kindercarry and Maya Tie.

Onbuhimos, podaegis, and other types of Asian-style carriers differ primarily in the number and arrangement of the straps, and the size of the body panel. Each has its respective pros and cons which is beyond the scope of this article, but if you think a mei tai is almost, but not quite, what you are looking for, you may want to investigate this category. Attend a BWI meeting or see the additional resources below for more information.

Buckle carrier. A buckle carrier is really any carrier that fastens with buckles, but the term usually means a modernized version of a mei tai. A “soft structured carrier” most often has substantial padding, especially in the hip belt, which transfers weight to the hips but may limit the versatility of the carrier. A “buckle tai” is a less-padded style that really is pretty much a mei tai with buckles; it is usually worn at the waist rather than on the hips. There are assorted variations and hybrids, notably the “half buckle” with one set of buckle straps (usually the waist) and one set of tie straps (usually at the shoulders).



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The buckled waist and shoulder straps allow you to put a buckle tai or soft structured carrier (SSC) on like a backpack; you don't have to wrap long straps around you and tie them in a knot. The pros and cons of this type are similar to those for mei tais, but buckle carriers are much more convenient to put on and take off, can be easier to learn back carries with, and are less adjustable for size and body shape. Because they're not as adjustable as an unstructured carrier, it can be hard to find one that fits you just right – especially if you are not an average size and shape person. SSCs are very comfortable for older, heavier babies but tend not to be as comfortable for front carries, and many are not recommended for newborns; the less structured buckle tais work better for front carries but don't have the same great support for back carrying an older child. A new development in some brands is a detachable support belt, which allows you to effectively convert the carrier from a buckle tai to an SSC.

Buckle carriers vary in many of the same respects as the Asian-style carriers on which they are based, including body panel size and shape, type and amount of strap padding, and so on; they also differ in the placement of the buckles and direction of adjusters, which affects whether and how easily the carrier can be used for front and/or hip carries. The buckle carrier category is expanding and changing very rapidly. As of this writing, popular brands of SSC include Ergo, Beco, Olives & Applesauce, Kanga (Bloo Kangaroo); popular buckle tais or hybrids include Pikkolo, Calyx, Connecta, Dream Carrier.

Other Styles. There are a number of other hybrids and variations of all of the above carrier types, including hip carriers (something of a cross between a ring sling and a mei tai or SSC), chuneis (a modern, structured version of a podaegi), and assorted custom inventions. These are worth considering if none of the major carrier types performs quite the way you'd like; attend a BWI meeting or see the additional resources below for more information.

Frontpacks like the Bjorn and Snugli are basically buckle carriers for newborns. They're not as versatile as any of the types described above, and usually not as comfortable for either the wearer or the baby. A complete discussion of why this is so goes beyond the scope of this article, but most frontpacks cannot realistically be worn for more than the first few months; beyond that they cause back and shoulder pain. Also, most frontpacks tend to position the baby with back arched and legs hanging downward; this position is not natural, stresses the spine and may be a risk factor for hip dysplasia. Frontpacks may be easy to manage if you're used to buckles, but they're rather expensive for such a limited useful life. If you happen to get one as a hand-me-down, keep it around in case you find it easier to use at first while you're still figuring out your unstructured carriers – but please pay careful attention to proper positioning.

Resources

My favorite babywearing resource is, of course, Babywearing International of the Bay Area, Inc.! Website (Yahoo group) link is on the first page above. Babywearing International is a recently-formed non-profit organization with affiliated local babywearing education and support groups in many places other than the Bay Area. For more information, including a glossary of babywearing terminology, and a list of chapters in other regions, visit www.babywearinginternational.org

Other excellent Internet-based non-vendor resources for learning a great deal about many different carriers are www.thebabywearer.com (articles, product and vendor directory with links, carrier reviews, and a very active and friendly discussion forum) and www.wearyourbaby.org (mostly about wraps, but lots of great information and links about the practical art of babywearing). There are also several babywearing-related Yahoo groups, including some focused on buying/selling/trading used carriers and on sewing your own carriers.

Baby carrier makers and vendors who carry a variety of different types and brands of carriers can also be good resources for free assistance. They are not, of course, impartial, but the owners and customer service staff of most of these businesses are moms and babywearers themselves, who are glad to “spread the love”! Some of the best wearing instruction videos and photos are on commercial sites; the instructions offered by the maker of a specific brand can usually be applied to any brand of the same general type of carrier. A few sites you might want to explore follow, but keep in mind that this is by no means an exhaustive list!

Vendors who carry multiple types/brands:

www.tendercargo.com (based in Berkeley)
www.carrymeaway.com (based in Napa)
www.theportablebaby.com (based in Saratoga)
www.theslingstation.com (with excellent wearing instructions – videos, pdfs and links – for multiple carrier types, and a good, very concise “how to choose” article)
www.peppermint.com
www.attachedtobaby.com
www.sobebabies.com
www.foxdenlane.com
www.quirkybaby.com
www.pieceofcloth.com

Brand name maker sites with notable wearing instruction page(s):

www.hotslings.com (pouches)
www.zolowear.com (ring slings and pouches)
www.sakurabloom.com (ring slings)
www.kozycarrier.com (mei tais)
www.wrapsodymama.com (wraps)
www.mobywrap.com (stretchy wraps – the “basic wrapping instructions” are a decent quick reference for getting the carrier on, but please note that many photos with babies show poor technique, and the depicted back carry is *not* recommended with any stretchy!!! Try the “pocket/pre-tie” videos at www.theslingstation.com instead.)
www.the-ergo-lady.com (SSC tips from the owner of SoBeBabies)

Do-it-yourself instructions and resources: <http://www.sleepingbaby.net/jan/Baby/>

Also, try a search of [YouTube!](https://www.youtube.com/) You will find many babywearing “how to” videos, of varying quality, featuring different types and brands of carrier. The clips taken from the Tummy 2 Tummy project are especially noteworthy (the entire collection – instructions for pouches, ring slings, mei tais and wraps – can also be purchased on DVD; more information at <http://www.tummy2tummy.com/>.)



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