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## First Steps



## What is Rock Climbing?

Rock climbing is awesome.

It's an activity in which you push the boundaries of your physical and mental capabilities, often leaving you bursting with a vibrant excitement that you never knew existed.

Climbing takes on many forms: from 'pulling on plastic' indoors to 'crushing hard' at the sport crag or 'bagging' the summit of an elusive alpine mountain.

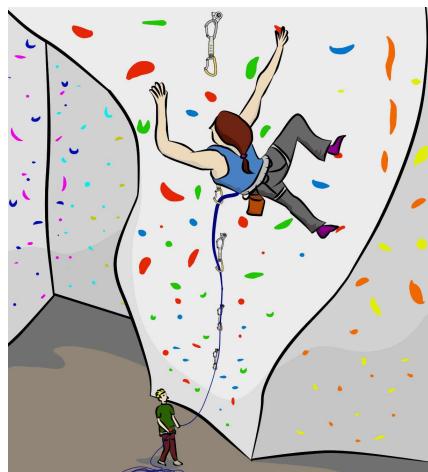
This guide, however, will introduce you to the very basics of indoor climbing, which is the safest place to begin.

It's important to take the time to become competent at these basic skills before you move on to more advanced styles of climbing. With a solid understanding of these techniques, you'll find it easy to progress in whichever discipline of climbing suits you.

## Can I Climb?

People of all ages, genders, backgrounds and abilities enjoy climbing. Rock climbs are graded by difficulty, with the easiest being similar to walking up a flight of stairs.

You don't need to be an athletic superhero with a rippling six-pack who can do 50 pull-ups. In fact, you never need to do any pull-ups, ever. So, why not give it a try? It might even be fun...



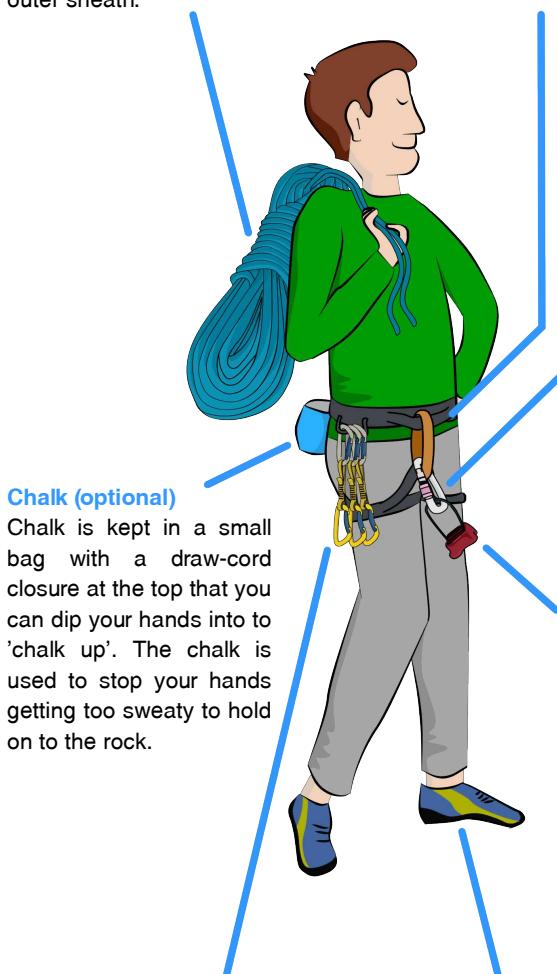
# What Do I Need To Climb Indoors?

## Rope

Your rope is the main part of the climbing system. It connects you, via your harness, to the quickdraws on the wall and to your climbing partner. Ropes have an inner core and an outer sheath.

## Harness

A harness keeps you safely attached to the rope. It is made of really strong, flat webbing, with buckles to fasten it tight and padding to make it comfortable.



## Chalk (optional)

Chalk is kept in a small bag with a draw-cord closure at the top that you can dip your hands into to 'chalk up'. The chalk is used to stop your hands getting too sweaty to hold on to the rock.

## Screwgate Carabiner

There are two main types of carabiner: screwgates and snapgates. A screwgate has a rotating tube which can be fastened over the 'nose' of the carabiner. This stops it from being opened accidentally.

## Belay Device

A belay device is a metal tube that you use together with a screwgate carabiner. The rope is fed through the belay device in a way which allows you to easily hold the weight of a falling climber.

## Quickdraws

A quickdraw is the 'clippy thing' that attaches your rope to the wall. They're made up of two snapgate carabiners which are joined together with a fabric sling.

## Shoes

Special climbing shoes make standing on small bits of rock a lot easier! They are designed to be tight fitting (like a sock) and have a rubber sole that sticks well to rock.

# Climbing Ropes

Most climbing gyms have ropes for you to use, but some require you to bring your own.

## Number of Falls

Every climbing rope is rated for a certain number of falls. This is the number of falls using a specific UIAA test which indicates how many falls a rope can take before it breaks.

Every UIAA certified rope is tested far more severely than you are likely to experience when climbing, so you don't need to retire your rope just because it's rated to six falls and you've taken seven.

In real climbing situations, a rope will withstand hundreds of falls. They don't fail unless they run over a sharp edge of rock, which cuts it, or if they have been stored amongst sharp objects or acidic chemicals such as bleach or leaking batteries. They do, however, wear out over time, especially if you take a lot of falls, so make sure to inspect your rope regularly (see page 19).

## Rope Type

Most beginners start with a 'single' rope. They are thick, durable and easy to belay with. Single ropes are marked with a **1** symbol at the end of the rope.

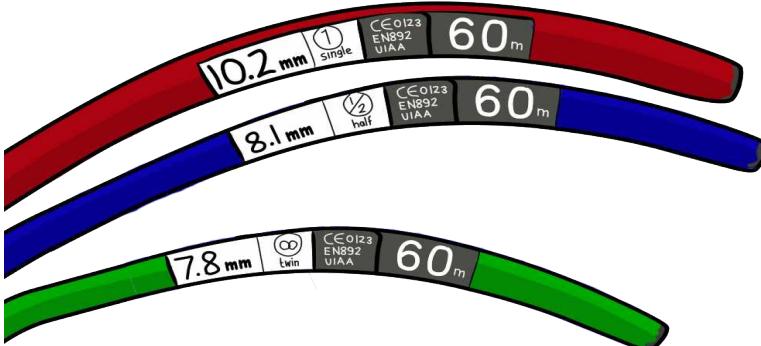
Be aware of half ropes and twin ropes (marked with  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\textcircled{O}$  symbols). These thinner cords are designed to be used as a pair.

## Diameter and Length

Climbing ropes are available in a range of diameters and lengths. Longer ropes enable you to climb longer pitches, but they weigh more. Thinner ropes are lighter, but wear out faster.

A 60m length with a diameter of between 9.7-10.2mm will suit most beginners and last well into your climbing career.

Be aware that the diameter of your rope may affect which belay devices you can use with it. Some devices will not work well, or at all, with very thin or very thick ropes.



# The Climbing Harness

## Gear Loops

These are for clipping gear to, such as quickdraws, so you can take them with you as you climb. They're not strong enough to hold your weight, so never attach the rope to them.

## Buckle

Buckles adjust the size of your harness for a comfortable and tight fit. It's important that they are fastened correctly (see page 23).

## Waist Belt

This fastens around the smallest part of your waist.



## Elastic

These stretchy pieces of fabric help to stop your leg loops from sliding down at the back. They can be adjusted too.

## Leg Loops

These fasten around the top of your thighs.

## Belay Loop

This super strong loop connects the waist belt to the leg loops. You use it to belay from.

# Choosing a Harness

## Trying a Harness On

Climbing harnesses are made in different sizes and shapes with different amounts of padding. It's worth going to your local shop and trying some on rather than ordering online.

Select a few harnesses that fit correctly, then hang in them. Good shops will have a facility for you to do this.

The leg loops should hold most of your weight, with the waist belt supporting your upper body so you don't tip upside-down.



## Leg Loops

Harnesses either have fixed size or adjustable leg loops. They should fit closely around your thighs without hindering movement.

Adjustable leg loops are useful if you plan to climb in cold environments where you'll need to wear thicker pants, or if the fixed size options just don't quite fit.

## The Rise

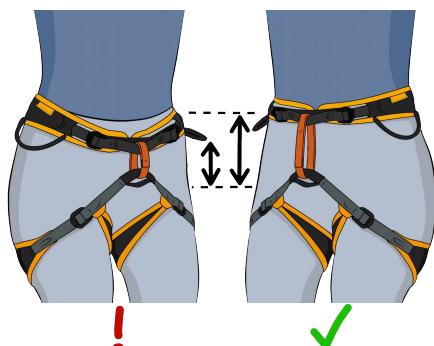
The rise is the distance between the waist belt and leg loops. Women's harnesses tend to have a bigger rise to fit women's body shapes better.

If the rise is too short, you won't be able to get the waist belt all the way up to the smallest part of your waist.

## Waist Belt

The waist belt should fit around the smallest part of your waist, above your hips.

It needs to adjust small enough to fit tight over a t-shirt, with enough adjustment to get it on easily or wear a jacket underneath too.



## Carabiners

Carabiners (often shortened to 'crab' or 'biner') are the mainstay of the climbing system. They're used to attach the rope to pieces of equipment, or to join two or more pieces of equipment together.

Carabiners are generally made of

aluminium. Shapes vary, but it's always some kind of elongated triangle or oval, with an opening gate on one side to allow you to easily clip and unclip stuff.

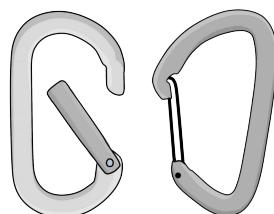
There are two main types: snapgates (non-lockers) and screwgates (lockers).

### Snapgates

Snapgates are the simplest carabiners. They're used for clipping the rope to gear, but not for anything really important such as belaying or anchors.

The gate can be made out of solid metal or a loop of wire: both work in the same way.

Snapgates cannot be locked. Instead, a spring system snaps the gate shut.

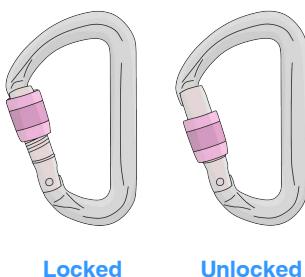


### Screwgates

Screwgate carabiners are used when you need to be 100% sure that the gate won't pop open. They're slower to use than snapgates, but safer.

The gate features a rotating tube which spirals around a screw thread. The gate is locked when the tube is positioned over the carabiner's nose.

To unlock it, simply unfasten the screw. Don't be tempted to tighten the screw too much — it'll be hard to unfasten.



## Autolocking Carabiners

You may also come across autolocking carabiners. The locking tube on these isn't threaded, but instead springs into place and needs twisting in a certain way to unlock.



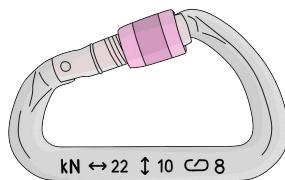
They're just as safe as screwgates, but can be fiddly to use at first.

## How Strong are Carabiners?

Climbing carabiners are always rated to at least 20kN (kilo Newtons). You don't need to understand the numbers, but that's REALLY strong. Strong enough to hold an elephant.

They are weaker if you cross-load them (load them sideways) or load them with the gate open (another reason to use screwgates for important stuff). See page 54 for more information about this.

The kN rating will always be written on the side of the carabiner; this is how you know your carabiner is safe for climbing and not just for your key chain.



## How Many Carabiners Do I Need?

Here's the good news: probably just one! When you're starting out at the climbing wall, you only need one screwgate carabiner for your belay device.

If you want to climb outside, you can build up a 'climbing rack' over time that will include a lot of carabiners. There's no rush though — learn the basics first.

## Quickdraws

A quickdraw (draw) is the 'clippy thing' that attaches your rope to the rock or climbing wall. They're made up of two snapgate carabiners with a fabric sling (known as a dog-bone) to join them.

Using just one carabiner on a bolt would cause the rope to get tangled in it. A quickdraw spaces the rope safely away from the bolt.

Most indoor walls require 4-10 draws for the height of the routes. Check with the staff how many you'll need before you start climbing up.

Quickdraws are available in many different lengths and with different styles of carabiner. For indoor climbing, get some with a sling length of 10-12cm.

### Bolt

The quickdraw needs to be attached to something in the rock to hold it there. At the indoor wall, this will be a bolt. Many venues already have quickdraws attached to the bolts for you. If yours doesn't, you'll need to bring your own.

### Bolt-End Carabiner

Quickdraws are made up of a bolt-end carabiner and a rope-end carabiner. The bolt-end carabiner is the one which moves freely on the fabric sling, and is the one which you clip to the bolt.

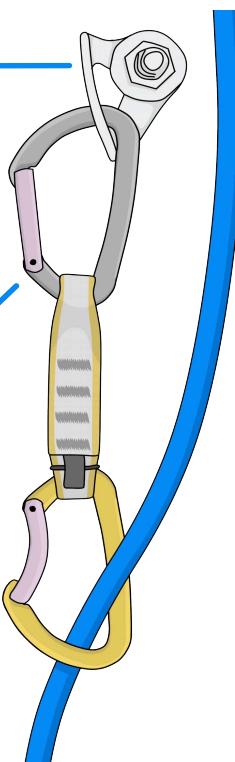
### Rope-End Carabiner

The rope-end carabiner usually has a curved gate and is held in with an elastic or rubber loop. The rope is clipped through this carabiner.

It's important not to get these two carabiners mixed up. The sharp edges of bolts can notch the bolt-end carabiner, which will damage your rope

### Carabiner

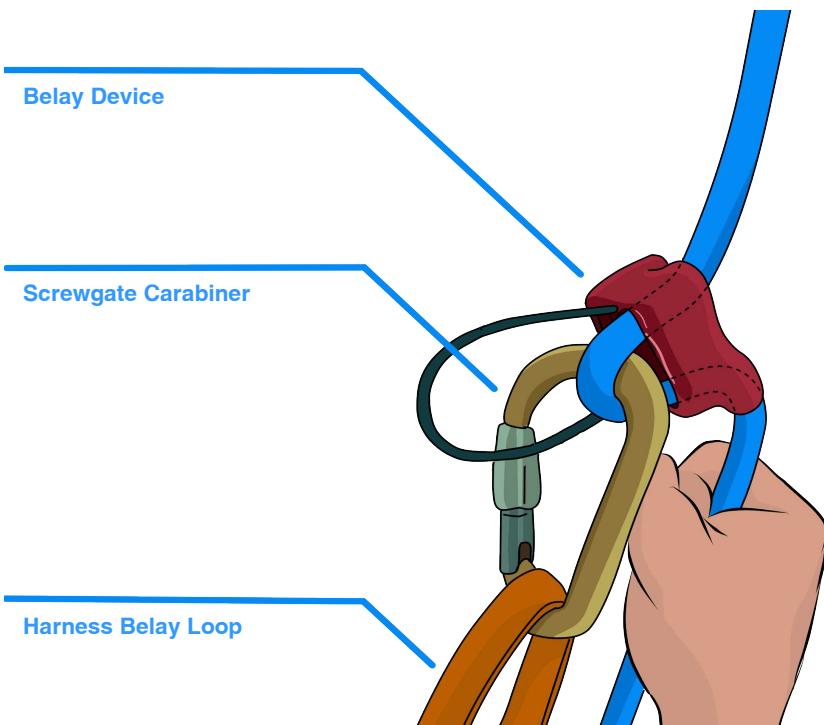
if you swap them over. It is recommended to use quickdraws with different coloured carabiners so it's easy to identify them.



## The Belay Device

A belay device is a metal tube that you use together with a screwgate carabiner. The rope is fed through the belay device and carabiner, and the belayer holds the rope underneath.

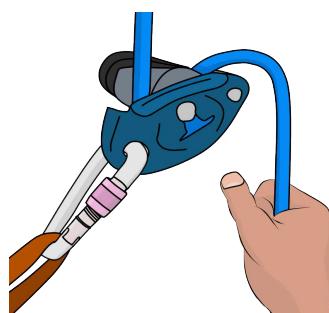
If weight is applied to the rope (e.g. if the climber falls) a huge amount of friction is created. This makes it easy to hold the climber's weight and stop them falling.



## Assisted Braking Belay Devices

Some belay devices, such as the Petzl GriGri have an assisted braking feature, which means they lock almost by themselves if the climber falls. They must be used differently to normal belay devices.

GriGri belaying techniques are detailed in *Sport Climbing Basics*.



# Climbing Shoes

## Shoe Types

Special climbing shoes make standing on small bits of rock a lot easier! They are designed to be tight fitting (like a sock) and have a rubber sole that sticks well to rock.

There are many types of climbing shoe on the market. To get the best fit, you should try a few different pairs on before you buy.

Look for something that's quite flat and stiff soled. If it's too downwards bent (aggressive) they'll probably make your feet hurt. These are designed for much harder climbing than you'll be doing to start with.

Really flexible shoes will also be painful on your feet. Pick something stiffer until you get used to balancing on the end of your toes.

Climbing shoes come with different fastenings — lace up, velcro or elastic. Just pick whichever you like — lace up and velcro offer the most adjustment.

## Size

Which size you buy is also important. It will feel strange to wear such tight shoes to start out with. Pick a size where your toes are snug into the end of the shoe, but not crunched up.

Climbing shoes are sized just like normal shoes, but different brands tend to fit differently. Just start trying on whichever size you would normally wear and go up or down from there. If you shop online, make sure you know exactly what size and type of shoe you need.



## Keeping Shoes Fresh

Most climbers prefer to wear shoes without socks, for increased sensitivity. This can cause your shoes to smell terrible after a while.

Don't leave sweaty shoes buried in your bag for days — air them out after each climb and use shoe fresheners when you store them.

## Climbing Chalk

Most climbers use a chalk bag and chalk. The chalk absorbs sweat, and therefore increases friction between your hands and the rock. Chalk is available either loose or in a small mesh ball. Using a ball is easier and less messy to start with, and many indoor walls don't allow loose chalk.

You'll also need a chalk bag to put it in. This is a small bag with a draw-cord closure at the top that you can dip a hand into to 'chalk up'. You can attach the chalk bag around your waist with a piece of cord or clip it to the back of your harness with a carabiner.



## Rope Bags and Tarps

Rope bags or tarps provide a clean space for your rope and are very convenient if you frequently move between routes. You never need to coil your rope — simply stack it into the tarp and roll it up. Then unroll it at the base of the next route and you're ready to go.

You can buy a specifically designed rope bag, but a heavy-duty IKEA bag works just fine too.



## Looking After Your Gear

It's important to inspect your climbing gear frequently and replace anything which shows significant signs of wear.

Frayed or faded slings, or any metal gear which has been dropped off a cliff should be replaced. Nylon gear (ropes, slings and harnesses) degrades over time and should be replaced every five years, even if you've barely used it. UV radiation from direct sunlight will speed this time up.

Exposure to battery acid or acid fumes will significantly reduce the strength of nylon.

Keep your rope out of the dirt. Grains of rock and sand can cut tiny fibres inside it. Wash your rope occasionally in lukewarm water and allow it to dry in the shade. Store your climbing gear in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight. If any gear gets wet, let it dry completely before you store it away.

## How To Inspect a Climbing Rope

You should check your rope for damage frequently. Starting at one end, feed the rope through your hands, looking and feeling for non-uniform sections. Look out for:

- Cuts
- Burns
- Flat or soft spots
- Sheath bunching up over the core

A slightly fuzzy sheath isn't a problem. However, severe fuzzing may make a rope unsafe.

As a general rule, if you can see a rope's inner core, the sheath has worn too thin and you should retire the rope. Make a nice rug out of it, or use it as a washing line.

## Buying Used Gear

You'll probably begin climbing using other people's gear but at some point you'll have to invest in your own. Be prepared though — climbing gear is expensive.

Pieces of equipment that your life depends on (e.g: ropes, harness,

carabiners), should be bought new. You can save money on other gear (e.g: shoes, chalk bags) by getting it used.

With your own gear, you will know the history of it and therefore know its reliability.

## Finding a Climbing Partner

It takes two to climb! There are a few different ways to find a climbing partner, including:

- At the indoor climbing gym
- On a climbing course
- At a climbing club
- Through friends
- On internet forums

However you find a partner, it's important to assess how safe they are. A good 'first date' is to climb at the gym. Be upfront and honest about your skills but be aware that some people

will exaggerate their abilities in order to impress.

If you are unsure of their abilities, have a staff member test you both on belaying and lead skills before you climb together. Don't blindly trust someone with your life until they have proven themselves trustworthy.

Stop climbing with someone who does strange or dangerous things. Instead, recommend that they take a course, or read this book, or both.

