

Afghan 101

An Easy Guide to Planning Blankets to Cuddle Everyone

by Cheryl Brunette

The Beloved Blanket

Afghans are one of life's great comforts. They flex to cuddle around elbows and knees that stick out when we tuck ourselves into chairs. They are portable cocoons that turn soggy November days into excuses to wrap up and knit or read.

Beyond the comfort they provide when finished, they are comforting to make. There are few worries about a perfect fit, and you don't have to think hard about shaping.

Some afghans are made in little pieces that travel with you to advisory board meetings or onto airplanes and are sewn together later. Others are big expanses that warm you twice, as you knit and as you snuggle.

The specs for afghans are minimal: they need to

- 1) lie flat
- 2) have "body"
- 3) be "big enough"

Lying Flat

Even though a knit and a purl are the front and back of the same loop, they have slightly different dimensions. The mechanics of a piece of fabric with all knits on one side is that the edges curl like crazy. The top and bottom curl toward the knit side and the sides curl toward the purl side. Thus the easiest way to create a flat piece of knitting is to balance the knits and purls on each side of the fabric.

Garter stitch, seed stitch and ribbing are examples of patterns that evenly mix knits and purls and lie flat. They have the added attraction of being reversible. Aran patterns that use seed stitch here, some cables intermixed with reverse stockinette there, can be designed to lie flat as well.

Some afghans, however, are partial acres of curly stockinette to which nonrolling borders of ribbing, garter, seed stitch or crochet are added. But be careful using this technique when designing your own afghans. The larger the piece of fabric, the stronger its tendency to curl, and a narrow band around the edge often cannot wrestle it into flat submission. You're more likely to succeed if:

a) your border is dense or heavy. Rows of single crochet make a dense fabric. Another good border is a double thickness or "faced" stockinette band. You pick up along the edge, right side facing you, and work in stockinette until the band is six or more inches long and your next row is a right-side row. Switch to a needle one or two sizes smaller and knit 3 rows. This gives you one tight knit row, a purl turning row and the first row of the facing. Continue in stockinette stitch with the smaller needle until your facing is as long as the front of the band. Bind off loosely and sew it down.

b) Your border should be wide, six inches or more depending on the size of the afghan.

c) Your border should be exactly the right length. Take a gauge swatch of the border pattern stitch and calculate the exact length you need. If you make it too short or too long, it will aggravate the tendency to roll and will look tacky besides.

d) Use wool or another natural fiber. You can steam-block or even steam-press natural fibers more rigorously than synthetics which can wilt or melt if you subject them to a wet cloth and iron.

Fabric with Body

"Body" in a fabric is a relative and subtle attribute. For one thing, it's related to weight and size. Years ago I made a couple of small mohair afghans on size 17 needles that weighed only a pound apiece (16 one-ounce balls). They were lacy and light, and even though the stitches were large, they held their shapes perfectly. If I'd used worsted weight wool with the same pattern they'd be misshapen rags by now.

In general, your fabric should feel "tight" or firm rather than loose. The reason so many afghans are crocheted is because solid crochet is denser than knitting given the same yarn

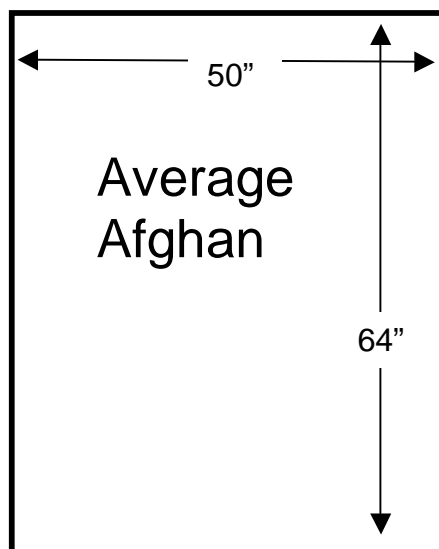
and needle sizes. Garter stitch, a great afghan fabric because it's flat, is an oozing disaster if it's too loose.

Let your hands and eyes guide you as you become more aware of “good afghan fabrics.”

One guideline is the “toss it on the bed” technique. Imagine shaking the afghan across the bed as if were the top sheet of a bed you were making. If it landed flat, with its edges straight, and roughly the same size as you intended, it would qualify as an afghan with the right “body.”

Big Enough

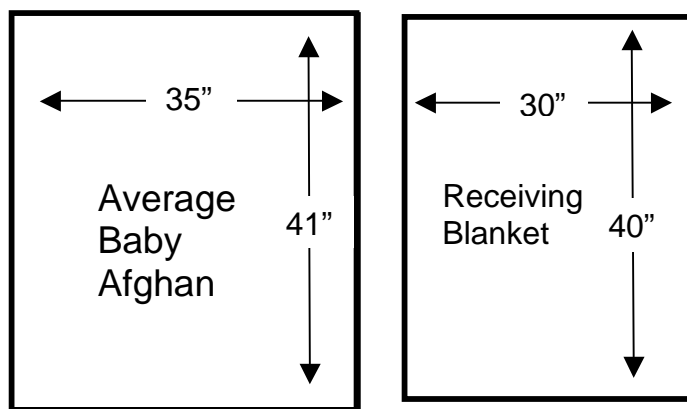
There really is no “right size” for an afghan. I analyzed 88 afghans and patterns [in 1993] and found that they varied in width from 40” to 58” and in length from 55” to 75”.



The average was 50” wide by 64” long, and that seemed ample. But these are just guidelines. How tall is the person you’re making it for? Is it supposed to be a two-person cuddler? How much yarn do you have? Are you having so much fun that you want to knit another 10 inches? Just relax and make “big enough.”

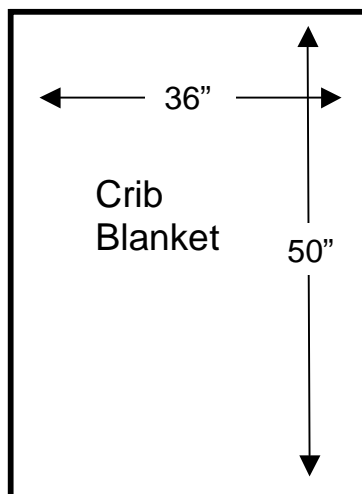
Specialty Sizes

Baby blankets or afghans average 34" to 36" wide and 40" to 42" long, but how big you make it depends partly on where the baby will be when s/he is snuggled.

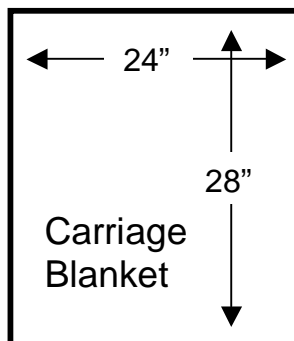


A receiving blanket swaddles an infant and is commonly 30" by 40", but my favorites were the 45" squares my mom made because they had plenty of overhang to keep out Pacific Northwest winter winds and rains.

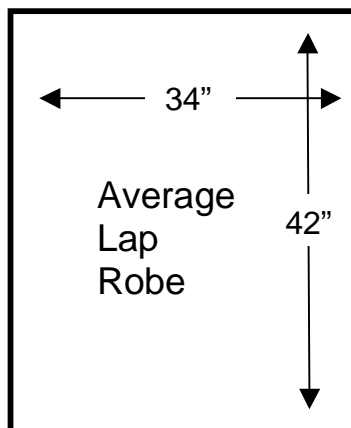
If the baby is to be under the afghan rather than wrapped in it, 36" by 50" fits a crib.



And a 24" by 28" blankie fits nicely in a baby carriage.



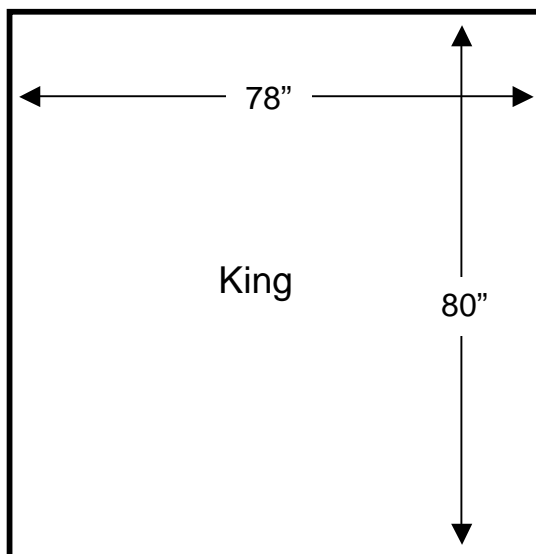
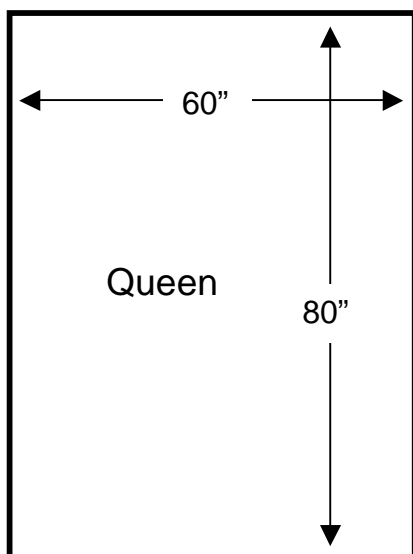
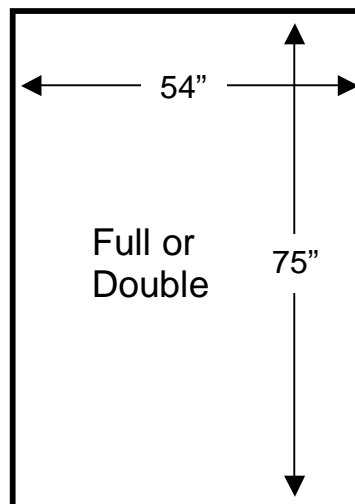
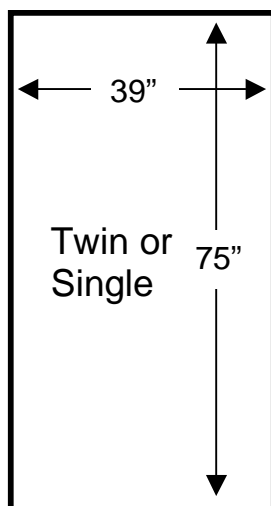
Lap robes are great for cars, football games, wheelchairs, easy chairs, and thermostats set low.



Their average width and length are 34" and 42", very close in size to baby afghans, but one might be as narrow as 28" or as wide as 4 feet, or between 3 and 5 feet long.

Covering a Bed

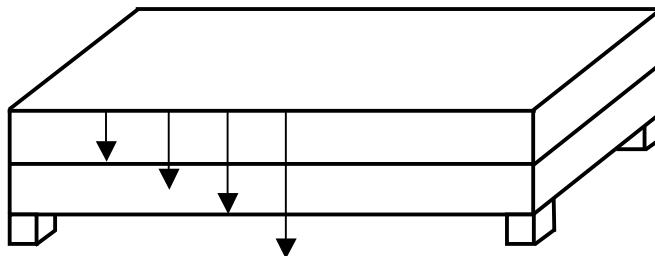
Perhaps you want to make a blanket, coverlet, or even a bedspread for a particular bed. These industry standards for bed dimensions can guide you:



There are also three less common bed sizes: the extra-long single, 39" x 80"; the three-quarter bed, which they manufactured for only a short time, 45" x 75"; and the California King, 72" x 84". (Are people taller in California?)

Blanket or Bedspread?

You might choose to make an afghan that covers just the top of the bed, or you might want it to overhang. Although mattress tops, looking down from the ceiling, are standard sizes, mattress heights vary. There are smooth tops, quilted tops, and old worn-out tops, so the best way to get exactly what you want is to measure the particular bed you want to cover.



The arrows represent drop length (**DL**), or how far it hangs past the edge of the bed. Decide how much you want your knitted expanse to overhang. Measure to there from the top edge of the bed. That becomes your **DL**. And it can be any length you want, although it might be cumbersome to make it longer than it takes to reach the floor. This is, after all, a blanket or bedspread, not a bridal dress.

Your total blanket width (**W**), then, is the width of the mattress plus 2 times your drop length or: $W = \text{mattress width} + 2\text{DL}$

Length has a few more choices. If you want the blanket to cover to the head of the mattress without going over any pillows, your total length (**L**), is the mattress length plus the drop length or: $L = \text{mattress length} + \text{DL}$

If you want the bedspread to go up and over the pillows, add 16 to 18 inches to your total length. If you want the blanket to stop short of the head of the bed, measure the distance from the head of the mattress to the place you want it to end, and subtract that measurement from your total length.

These measurements and formulas are designed to work with simple bedding, a single, thin blanket over the sheets and a regular pillow. If you have thick bedding and extra fluffy pillows you need to measure over them with a flexible tape measure. In fact, you can simply measure any bed rather than use the standard dimensions and formulas as guides, but it's easier to work with pictures and numbers than to try to get an accurate measurement, especially if you're alone.

A Special Touch: the Treasure Pocket

What could be more comforting to a young child traveling away from home than a personal afghan with a pocket into which a favorite doll, knitted toy, or surprise treat has been tucked?

Pockets are squares or rectangles attached on three sides with a non-rolling border at the top, like an inch or so or rib. A single buttonhole centered in the border that fastens over a colorful button can keep a toy safe and private. A pocket in a lap robe for an adult wheelchair passenger is ideal for keeping a handkerchief or book on board.

Although anything from 4” to 6” wide and deep is standard, a pocket could be an extravagant 10” to 12” wide or deep to hold a tall doll or magazine.

Where to place the pocket depends on how you visualize the blanket being used. On a lap robe you could put it 6” in from the edges of the upper right hand corner, but you might place it in a lower corner of a crib blanket. If it’s for a happily squirmy 4-year-old, you might place it in the middle and use two buttons to close it.

Some Afghan Philosophy

In 1905, Bessie Stanley of Lincoln Kansas, “at the earnest solicitation of Mr. Stanley,” wrote an essay on “What constitutes success” for entrance in a contest. She won the first prize of \$250 with this essay which is my favorite definition of success:

“He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much; who has gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul; who has never lacked appreciation of earth’s beauty or failed to express it; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction.”

She forgot only one thing to make the definition complete: “to have made enough afghans so that everyone in the house can cuddle up with a book on a soggy November day.”