

# How to Play Chopsticks

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Last Updated: November 3, 2021

Chopsticks is a game of [strategy](#) as well as basic math. It has roots in Japan and can also called Finger Chess, Swords, Split, Magic Fingers, Chinese Fingers, Cherries, Sticks, and Twiddly Dinks. Though there are many variations of rules and different names, the overall theory and spirit of the game remains the same. This game is not the widely known beginner's piano [song](#) though it shares the same name.

## Part 1

### Part 1 of 3: Learning the Basic Rules



- 1 Start with two players.** You need a minimum of two people to play Chopsticks but there is opportunity later to add more opponents.



**2 Face your opponent as you both put your hands in front of you.** Each time you start a round of the game you both hold your hands out with one finger extended. Make sure that both you and your partner keep both hands flat and straight out so that both of you can see how many fingers each person has extended throughout the rest of the game.



**3 Pick one person to go first.** You will then take turns going back and forth. On each turn, one player will use one hand to tap one of their opponent's hand. Let's assume you are going first.



**4 Tap one of your opponent's hand with one of yours.** If you tap with one finger then your opponent will add your one finger + their extended fingers and extend the sum of the two.

- For example, you tap your opponent's hand. You have one finger and they have two. They then add the fingers and on their tapped hand, they put out three fingers.
- On the next turn, your opponent uses their hand of three fingers to tap your hand of one. You now have to hold out four fingers because your one finger plus their three equals four fingers.
- Only the tapping hand has the power to change your opponent's hand. [1]



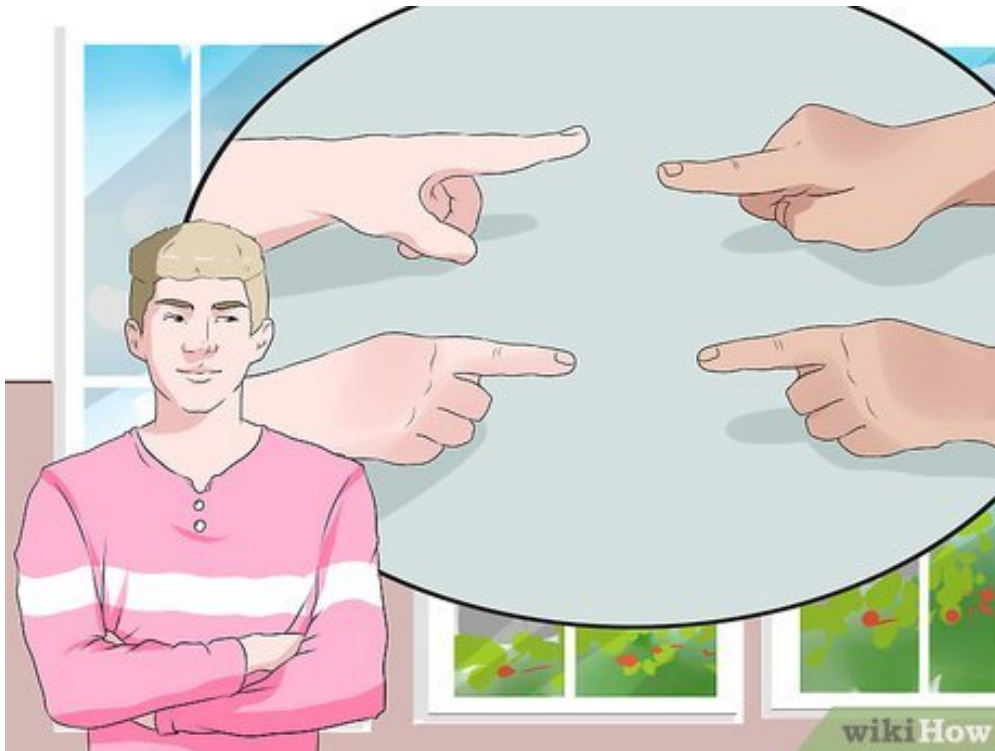
**5 Take turns between players to tap each others' hands.** The goal is to keep going and adding fingers to your opponent's hand by tapping. When someone's hand reaches five fingers that are extended, that hand is considered "dead" and is no longer in play.<sup>[2]</sup>

- There are several variations of this rule, but the simple rules of Chopsticks dictate that once a hand has reached five fingers, that hand is useless. Which makes sense because one of background stories behind Chopsticks is that you can hold a chopstick with up to one finger, but an open hand means that you are going to drop your utensil and food as well.<sup>[3]</sup>



**6 Hide dead hands behind your back.** Continue playing until one player has lost both of their hands. The goal is to be the last one standing with at least one hand left still alive.





**7 Master the basics and then add new rules.** Like many math and strategy games such as chess, there are a limited amount of plays that are possible before the game becomes predictable. To prevent the same player winning every round and the other player losing, add the other rules to make the game play fair.

Part  
2

## Part 2 of 3: Adding New Rules



**1 Make the game more interesting by adding new rules.** Once you master the basic rules and can add speed, create new challenges. There are several name variations for the rules, but they remain the same even though this game is played internationally.



**2 Introduce splits into the game.** When it's your turn, you can tap your own two hands together to redistribute the number of fingers you have extended. For example, if you have one hand with three fingers and one hand with just one finger and you split them, you can put two fingers on each hand.

- The goal of this strategy is to prevent one of your hands from reaching five fingers and becoming dead.
- Splits don't have to be even, but it's preferable. Some odd number combinations merely means swapping fingers between hands with no strategic bonus. However, if you have a combination such as four fingers and one finger on each hand, you can split that into a hand of three and a hand of two.
- A player can "revive" a dead hand by splitting. If you have one hand dead and one alive with four fingers, you can split and put two fingers on each hand to bring your dead hand back into the game.
- A variation on the splits rule is the "house rule." This rule either means that splits are not allowed or that splits are allowed but can't bring a hand back from the dead.<sup>[4]</sup>



**3 Add the "game of five."** A hand must be tapped to equal exactly five fingers. For example, if your opponent has 3 fingers, you can only tap them with a hand with 1 or 2 fingers. You would not be able to tap their hand if yours has 3 or 4 fingers because that would create a sum of more than 5 fingers on the tapped hand.<sup>[5]</sup>

- This rule is also known as "exact play."
- This rule allows for the possibility of stalemate if both players have two hands of four points

### Part 3 of 3: Making it Challenging



**1 Play with more than one person.** You can have three players, or you could have a whole circle of players. Everyone should stand in a circle and face toward the middle so that everyone's hands are visible. Take turns going clockwise or counterclockwise, and keep in mind that you aren't limited to only tapping the people directly next to you.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Adding people will make the game stretch on much longer.
- This method requires much more focus to win. With so many people playing, there may be a person with a hand about to reach five fingers who splits their fingers and it goes unnoticed by the group.
- Make sure that everyone is following the same set of rules before starting. There is no wrong way to play but make sure everyone is in agreement with rules before starting a round.





- 2 Increase the mathematical difficulty by adding nubs.** Rather than having fully extended fingers for the whole game, you can use curled fingers or "nubs." Nubs are created by splitting an odd number of fingers on one of your turns.<sup>[7]</sup>
- Two nubs equal one finger so it takes longer to make a combination or nubs and full fingers equal enough for a dead hand.
  - Decide if nubs are allowed at the beginning of the game. A desperate player will often add the nubs variant when they are about to lose.
  - An example for splitting fingers into nubs can look like this: there are two fingers on your left hand and three on your right. If you split them, you can put 2.5 fingers or, two fingers and a nub, on either hand. Nubs are most beneficial for when you have a total uneven amount of fingers.
  - You must complete someone's nub in order to make it a full finger. To make a dead hand you must have five full fingers, not four full fingers and one nub.



**3 Use leftovers to make the game last longer.** A hand does not die but instead stays in the game or comes "back to life" when a tapped hand exceeds five fingers in a turn. When using leftovers, you can add three and four fingers together to get 7 fingers, which equals a dead hand plus two more.

- Sometimes this variation is called "zombies."
- This rule could make the game could go on forever since you recycle fingers. The only option for a dead hand is that it equals exactly five fingers when tapped.[8]



## Community Q&A

### Question

Can there even be 5 people?



Community Answer

Yes, it does not matter how many players there are.

Helpful 83 Not Helpful 21

### Question

If I have an odd number on one hand, can I still split?



Community Answer

Yes. The split does not have to be even.

Helpful 86 Not Helpful 17

Question

**Can three players play?**



Community Answer

Yes. Just make sure you all are comfortable.

Helpful 79 Not Helpful 26

Question

**Is there another turn for the person after splitting the fingers?**



Community Answer

After splitting or dividing your fingers, it is the next person's turn.

Helpful 84 Not Helpful 27

Question

**Does it matter how many fingers I use to tap my opponent's hand?**



Community Answer

Yes, because the number of fingers on your hand are added to the number of fingers on your opponent's hand.

Helpful 44 Not Helpful 18

Question

**What do I do when I have two fingers up on one hand and my opponent taps me with four fingers?**



Community Answer

Since the total number of fingers would then be greater than five (in this case six) you would add the number of fingers up, subtract 5, and only use the leftovers. In your scenario, the hand would end up having only one finger on it.

Helpful 46 Not Helpful 24

Question

**Is this game like Rock, Paper, Scissors?**



Community Answer

They're similar in that you use your hands to play, but the rules aren't the same at all.

Helpful 23 Not Helpful 18

Question

**Are there different ways to play Chopsticks?**



Community Answer

Yes. Some people use switches, which sometimes count as a move and sometimes don't. Some people don't know what switches are.

Helpful 43 Not Helpful 43

#### Question

**In chopsticks, the finger game, are you allowed to revive your opponent's dead hand?**



Community Answer

No. The goal of the game is to make both of your opponent's hands "dead."

Helpful 45 Not Helpful 40

#### Question

**Can I split three and three into four and two?**



Community Answer

Yes, but be aware that someone can immediately get you out using the hand with four fingers.

Helpful 25 Not Helpful 30

[See more answers](#)



### Tips

- Over time you will pick up patterns that this game can have and you will become more fast and proficient. This is a great way for younger children to learn addition since it is tangible and fun at the same time.
- In some game variations, the game may loop when more complicated rules have been added. from both sides result in the game starting over.
- When playing against a new opponent, make sure to establish the ground rules of the game that you want to play by right away. For instance, this will save confusion half way through the game when someone wants to play with nubs and the the other player is unfamiliar with that rule.



### Warnings

- The variants of Chopsticks that do create loops usually takes a longer time to play.
- This game requires a lot of attention on your part. Don't play Chopsticks if you need to focus on something, however this is a great game for killing time that doesn't require supplies and can be played anywhere.

## References

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Co-authors: **48**  
Updated: **November 3, 2021**  
Views: **366,213**

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