

Chapter 11

Guitar Chords

This chapter introduces you to the most basic guitar chords and shows you how chords are diagrammed.

How Chords are Diagrammed

Compare the photograph, on the right, of the Dm chord, with its chord diagram on the left. Once you understand the graphics, a chord diagram is easy to work with. Chord diagrams are, with occasional small variants, uniform in how they are presented, regardless of the guitar style you are exploring.

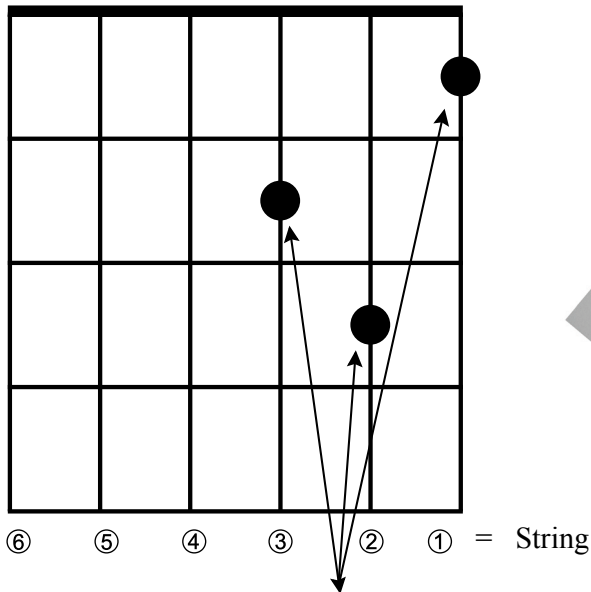
Over time, memorize the name and fingering placement for each chord you encounter. Also most of the basic chords have alternative fingerings. In the example below, sometimes it is better technically to use the 4th finger on the 2nd string instead of the 3rd finger. The music will usually suggest which fingering is preferred.

D minor = Chord Name

Do not play strings with an "X"

The "O" means to play the open string

X X 0 2 3 1 ←Fingers for the left hand to place on the frets.



Where to place left hand fingers

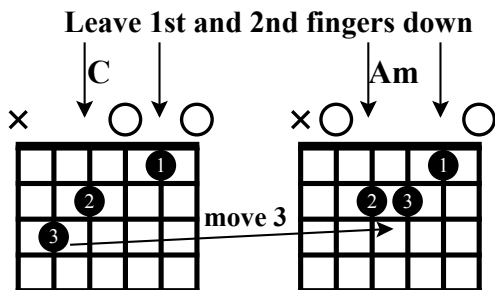
Notes of the D minor chord



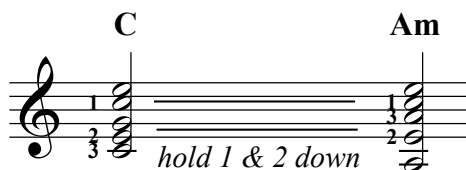
Hints on Playing Chords

1. Memorize all basic guitar chords. (In this section the chord diagrams will show the finger number *on* the fretboard. Most of the time fingerings are shown at the top line of the diagram.)
2. Place down all fingers simultaneously. At first this is elusive. Over time it will become much easier.
3. Study and practice the most efficient way of shifting from chord to chord:
 - a. Holding Down: If two chords share one or more notes leave the "shared" finger(s) down. In other words, the "shared" note and finger stays in place while moving the other fingers to their new position. The chord diagrams below illustrate this important principle:

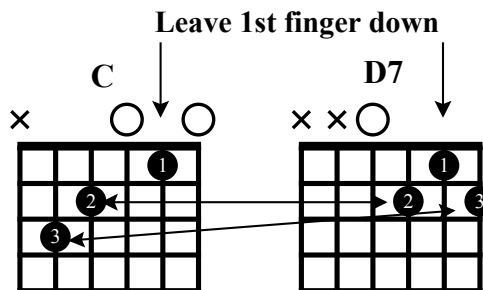
The C and Am chords share the 1st & 2nd finger location:



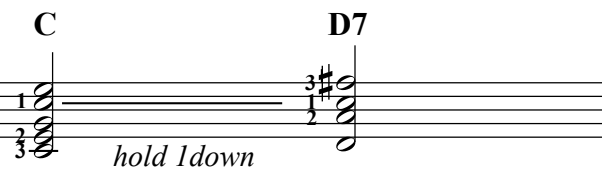
Only 3rd finger moves



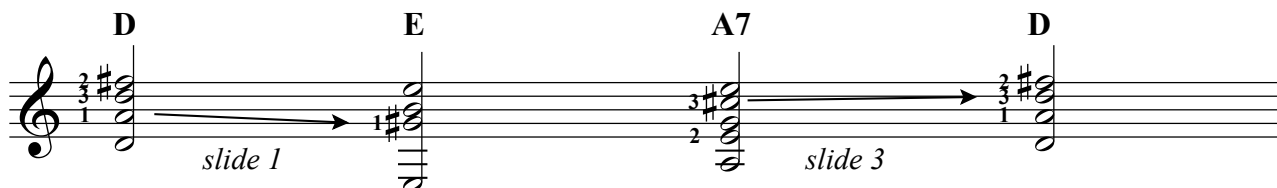
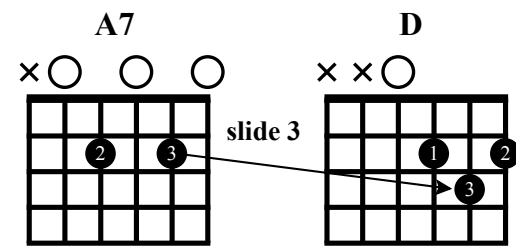
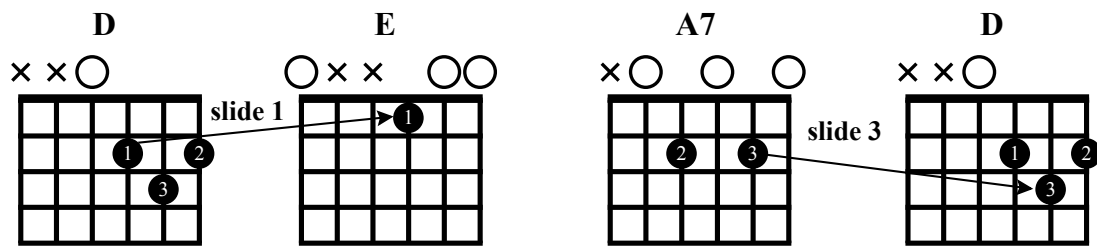
The C and D7 chords share the 1st finger location:



Move 3rd and 2nd fingers



- b. Slide a finger along the string to the correct fret of the chord you are going to:



15 Basic Guitar Chords

In this section there are 15 chords which are essential for playing the guitar in any style.

To Play Chords:

Each chord is presented in music notation with its chord chart graphically presented above the notes.

Each diagram shows the correct placement of the fingers.

Remember that an "X" means don't play that string and that an "O" means to play that string open.

Above each diagram is the name of the chord. For example *Am* means A minor, *A* means A major, *A7* means "A dominant 7". Chapter 15 explores how chords are constructed.

Below the diagram are the notes sounded when you play the chord.

Once your left hand is holding down the strings, try strumming the chord notes with your right thumb.

Listen to and compare the sonic character of each kind of chord: major, minor, and dominant 7th.

For example, the A major chord, just by changing the 3rd string note from the note A to the note G, becomes transformed to A7.

Also compare the A chord to the A minor: A major becomes A minor by lowering the C# of the A chord by one fret to play a C natural. Each chord has a unique sound quality, and these different qualities are crucial to the inner workings of music structures.

chord name

A A⁷ Am B⁷ C

chord notes

Remember that *everyone* learns chords *one* at a time. Then they are practiced in sequences called harmonic progressions. Each new chord takes about 6 weeks of introduction, practice, and review for it to start to become thoroughly familiar.

Keep in mind that chords by *themselves* are not meaningful *harmonically*. In order for chords to have musical meaning they are combined together in sequences called chord progressions.

Building up a basic vocabulary of chords is one of the most rewarding experiences for the guitarist. Just remember to be patient. There is no reason to be in a hurry. Each chord contains many dimensions of sound quality, so take time to experiment, play, and enjoy the character and challenges offered by each chord.

Diagram showing the fingerings and musical notation for five chords: C7, D, D7, Dm, and E. Each chord is represented by a fretboard diagram with finger numbers (1-5) and a musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 3/4 time signature. The fretboard diagrams show the following fingerings: C7 (x, 2, 3, 4, 1, 0), D (x, x, 0, 2, 1, 3), D7 (x, x, 0, 2, 3, 1), Dm (x, x, 0, 2, 3, 1), and E (0, 2, 3, 1, 0, 0).

As mentioned, all of these chords occur in a wide range of guitar styles. The diagrams are excellent for helping you form a mental image of the layout of fingers on the fretboard.

The F major chord requires a 6 string bar.
Look over the chapter on "Bar Chords" before learning this chord.

Diagram showing the fingerings and musical notation for five chords: E7, Em, F, G, and G7. Each chord is represented by a fretboard diagram with finger numbers (1-5) and a musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The fretboard diagrams show the following fingerings: E7 (0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 1), Em (0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 3), F (1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 1), G (0, 0, 0, 2, 1, 3), and G7 (0, 0, 0, 2, 3, 1). An arrow points from the text above to the F chord diagram.

One goal is to be able to look at the chord's notes and instantly picture the fingering of the chord you are looking at. It may seem like a difficult task at first, but these chords recur so often that they eventually become completely familiar - in sound, visual appearance, and how they are fingered. Over time the reading and playing of chords becomes second nature.

Bar Chords

One finger of the left hand pressing down two or more strings simultaneously is called a bar. Barring is more difficult in the beginning stages of playing guitar than many of the other basic techniques.

The following is an explanation of the notation for bars, the different kinds of bars, as well as some hints on mastering the bar technique.

Bar Notation

The bar is notated with a simple group of symbols that give instructions about the bar.

What you need to know is:

1. The letter "**B**" above the notes to be barred indicates that a bar is to be used there.
2. A roman numeral (for example: **II**) tells you at what fret to place the bar.
3. The subscript number in front of the "**B**" → **₃BII** indicates how many strings are included in the bar.
4. A bracket indicates how long to hold the bar. If the bar is only for one chord there is no bracket.

The letter "B" indicates to place a bar: ↓ ↓ The roman numeral indicates which fret to place the bar on:

The subscript number indicates how many strings to bar: → **₃BII** The bracket (below) indicates the duration of the bar:

There are several different kinds of bar. The most common are:

1. The **Full Bar** is when one finger covers all six strings:



Although the illustration may give an impression that the bar finger is on top of the fret, it is actually positioned *just behind* the fret. Note that the bar finger is parallel to the fret.



2. When the bar finger presses fewer than 6 strings that is called a **Partial Bar**, or **Half Bar**. The term *half bar* lacks precision: in some editions it can refer to anywhere from 2 to 5 strings to be barred. For that reason I prefer to use the term *Partial Bar*. The subscript notation placed just before the bar indicator "B" will always tell you how many strings to bar. If the edition of your music lacks a symbol for how many strings to bar, it is easy to tell how many strings to bar by checking the note locations of the chord.

The **Partial Bar** can be done in two ways:

a. With a *straight* finger:



The tip of the bar finger, with just a little bit of pressure, can easily give the lowest note of the bar a full clear tone.



b. With the *finger bent* at the first joint:



In the photograph you can clearly see a gentle bend in the first joint of the bar finger. Not everyone's finger is capable of bending in this way. So if your index finger does not naturally bend do not worry about it at all. A two-string bar is the easiest of all the bar chord forms and a straight first joint works just fine.



Hints on Improving the Bar

At first playing bar chords is challenging. Novices try to use maximum strength and press as hard as possible to produce a clear sound. In reality it is leverage and properly engineered left hand placement that is most important.

Just about everyone, at first, tends to overwork the hand in the quest to get a good sound from the bar chord. Because tired muscles lack the necessary coordination for a successful result, practice the bar chords for a few minutes only, and learn to take a short rest as soon as you notice fatigue. A telltale sign of overworking the hand is when you feel an aching sensation in the muscles between the left hand thumb and the forefinger.

Be sure to rest your hand when fatigue sets in. There is no benefit in working at bar technique when your hand feels tired or stressed.

Keep in mind the following hints as you explore the bar:

1. Keep the bar finger straight and absolutely parallel to the fret.
2. Keep the bar finger close to the fret, just behind it. If you place the finger over the fret you will hear a muted instead of a clear sound. (In the photographs illustrating various bars, it *looks* as if the 1st finger is covering the fret. Actually the bar pressure is being fully applied *just behind* the fret. If your bar finger straddles the fret you will hear a muted sound. Keep making small adjustments until the sound is clear and without muting or buzzing.)
3. Check the position of your left thumb - good placement will improve the leverage needed for a proper sounding bar chord.
4. Apply only a reasonable amount of force when barring. More often than not, poor results when barring come from *lack of leverage* rather than lack of strength.
5. So, if you hear a kind of muted-buzzy sound emerging from your attempts, do not assume you have applied insufficient force. Rather, see if you are already pressing too hard.
6. It is more effective to completely restructure your hand position in the bar than to try to correct the bar while continuing to hold on to what is not working.
7. Bar technique is best delved into *after* you have established a pretty good knowledge of the basic chords. Once you are comfortable with those chords (see pages 45-46 for the 15 Basic Chords) your technique will have grown to the point where a focus on bar chords will be fruitful.