

Dominoes Rules

The Basics

You may already play some domino games. If so, you may find that the rules on this website are not the exact rules as the ones you've learned. There are many domino games that go by different names and yet have extremely similar, and sometimes even identical, rules. Also, there are many games that go by the same name in various parts of the world, but the rules vary from place to place.

We have included on our website rules to many different domino games. Most of the domino game rules included on our website also included several different rule variations. Whether you choose to follow the rules precisely or create your own variation is irrelevant, as long as all the players clearly understand what the rules are and agree to them before the game begins. It is also important, of course, that you make sure the rules you choose to play with are functional.

The basic rules here apply to most domino games shown on our website, but not all of them. For example, there are a few games on this website where hands are not drawn, and, of course, the basic rules that pertain to more than one player would not apply to solitaire games.

In many domino games, a line of tiles is formed on the table as players make their plays, usually, but not always, by matching the pips on the open end of the domino. This formation of tiles is called the line of play. There are basic instructions listed here under Line of Play specifically for those games.

Shuffling the Tiles

Before every game, a player shuffles the tiles face down on a flat playing surface, thoroughly mixing them by moving them with his hands. The player's hands may not stay on the same tiles while shuffling, and the player who does the shuffling should be the last to draw his hand for the game.

Players may choose to take turns shuffling before each game or the same player may shuffle the dominoes before each game.

Here are two of several options: 1) The player to the right of the player making the first play does the shuffling for a game; or, 2) The winner of the previous game shuffles for the next game.

Seating Arrangement

A player's position at the table in a game with three or more players is called a seat.

One way to determine seating arrangements is by lot. After the tiles are shuffled, each player draws a domino from the stock. The player who draws the tile with the greatest number of pips has first choice of seats. The player holding the next highest seats himself to the left, and so on. If there is a tie, it is broken by drawing new dominoes from the stock. The tiles are returned to the stock and reshuffled before the players draw their hands. When a partnership game is played, the partners sit opposite each other.

Order of Play

There are several different ways to determine which player will make the first play: 1) Draw lots. 2) Begin the game by setting the heaviest domino. 3) Have the winner of the previous game make the first play of the next game. After it is determined who will make the first play of the game, the order of play will be decided by the seating arrangement. Play will continue to the left, clockwise, after the first play is made. Or, you may choose to play in a counter-clockwise rotation, as is done in some Latin American countries, as long as all players agree to it before the game.

Drawing Lots to Determine Who Will Make the First Play

After the tiles are shuffled, each player draws a domino from the stock. The player who draws the heaviest tile will make the first play. If there is a tie, it is broken by drawing new dominoes from the stock.

Beginning the Game by Setting the Heaviest Domino

In some domino games, the rules state that the first play must be made by the player with the highest double in his hand. Rules for other games state that the first play must be made by the player with the heaviest domino, double or single, as the case may be.

Highest Double: After the tiles are shuffled, each player draws his hand from the stock. The player who draws the highest double of the set (i.e., double-9 if playing with a double-9 set), plays it as the lead. If the highest double was not drawn, the second highest double is

played. If the second highest double was not drawn, the third highest double is played, and so on, until a double is played. If none of the players holds a double in his hand, all hands are discarded, reshuffled, and new hands are drawn. After the first player sets his double, the second play is made by the player to his left and play continues clockwise.

Heaviest Tile: Follow the instructions above for "Highest Double" with this exception: Instead of drawing new hands if no player holds a double tile, the player holding the heaviest single begins play.

Winner of the Last Game: The winner of the last game played may open the next game. Or, if a game ends in a tie, the player who placed the last tile plays the first tile in the next game.

Drawing the Hand

Each player draws the number of tiles specified in the rules for the domino game being played and then places them in front of himself in such a way that the other players can't see the pips on his tiles.

After all hands have been drawn, there may be a surplus of tiles left in the stock. These tiles should remain face down, and, depending on the rules of the game being played, may be bought (See "Passing and Byeing" below.) later in that game.

Opening the Game

Determine who will make the first play, as explained above in "Order of Play" and according to the rules of the particular domino game being played. The player making the first play may be referred to as the setter, the downer, or the leader. He should place his tile face up in the middle of the table.

The words set, down, and lead are all used as verbs to refer to the act of making the first play of the game. "The set," "the down," and "the lead" are used as nouns to refer to the first domino played in a game and also the first play of the game.

Here is a rule variation that players may agree to employ: Anytime a player plays a double, whether for the opening of the game or anytime thereafter during the game, he may immediately play a second tile onto his double before the next player makes his play.

Passing and Byeing

Any player who does not hold a tile in his hand with the correct number of pips, and therefore cannot make the next play, must either pass or bye from the stock, according to the rules of the game. Some games permit players to skip a play if they so choose, even if they hold a playable tile.

Passing is also called knocking and renouncing. The player who is unable to make a play must announce to the other players, "I pass," and then the next player takes his turn. If no one is able to make a play, the game ends.

In some games byeing tiles from the stock is allowed. In this case, a player draws the number of tiles he is permitted to take according to the rules of that game, adding them to the tiles he is holding in his hand. Once the player has drawn a tile he is able to play, he plays that domino.

There are many domino games that have the rule that all tiles in the stock may be bought, and there are others which have the rule that some tiles must be left in the stock and can not be bought. In the case of the latter, the number of pips on the tiles left in the stock at the end of the game would be added to the winner's score.

Line of Play

There are many domino games that depend upon matching suits. In these games, the first player sets his domino, then the player to his left adds his tile to one of the free ends, and so on, going clockwise around the table with each player adding a tile. Players add tiles that have the matching number of pips with an open end of an already played tile.

As each player matches and plays a tile, a line is formed. This configuration of dominoes is called the layout, string, or line of play. In order to prevent tiles from falling off the table when the line of play extends too far, dominoes may be played in any direction. Regardless of the pattern of the line of play, the open end of the last domino played remains the same.

Dominoes are joined to the line of play in two ways: 1) with the line of play, lengthwise, the dominoes played end to end; or, 2) across the line of play, crosswise, the dominoes played across the matching number. In most domino games, doubles, and only doubles, are played

crosswise; singles are played lengthwise, and the next tile is added after each double played, if the double is not a spinner, must be lengthwise.

Spinners

A spinner is a double which can be played on all four sides. Depending on the rules of the game being played, the double played as the lead is the only spinner of the game; or, every double played throughout the game is a spinner. If the double played is not a spinner, it may be played on only two sides.

Scoring

In some domino games, part of the score is obtained from the total number of pips at the ends of the line of play as the game progresses. If only one domino has been played, both ends of that domino are ends of the line of play. Thus, if a 5-5 tile is played, the count would be 10.

If two dominoes have been played, the count depends on whether both tiles are with the line of play or one tile is with and the other tile is across the line of play. For example, if the 3-5 and 5-1 tiles are played, the count is 4 (3+1). The matching halves of each of the two dominoes would be joined, end to end, with the open ends being 3 and 1. If the 3-5 and 5-5 tiles are played, the count is 13 (3+5+5). The double tile, 5-5, would be played across the line of play, and both halves of the double would be considered ends of the line of play.

Given the last example, if a tile is now played on the 5-5, assuming it is not a spinner, the 5-5 is no longer an end for the purpose of counting. See the example below. The line of play is 3-5, 5-5, 5-1, and the count is 4 (3+1). If the 5-5 is not a spinner in this case, the 5-5 is not an end.

In some domino games, a score is made only when the count of the ends of the line of play are a multiple of 5 or a multiple of 3, for example.

Another scoring method used in many domino games is to take the losing players' total number of pips by counting the pips on the tiles left in their hands at the end of a hand or the game and then adding that number to the winner's score.

Here is a rule variation that players may agree to employ: When counting the pips on the tiles left in the losers' hands at the end of a hand or the game, count only one end of a double (i.e., 4-4 counts as only 4 points).

End of the Game

Some domino games end once a certain number of hands have been played or a player or team makes the necessary points to win. For many other domino games, the object of the game is to be the first player (or team) to dispose of all the dominoes in your hand. These domino games end when a player has played all the dominoes in his hand before the other players and announces, "Domino." Sometimes none of the players are able to make another play. This is called a blocked game, and, in case the game is blocked and no one is able to make another play, the game would end.

What To Do If These Accidents Occur:

Dominoes Are Exposed In Error

If your domino is accidentally exposed to another player, it must then be exposed to all of the players.

Too Many Tiles Are Drawn

If a player draws more tiles for his hand than he is entitled to, it is called an overdraw. Once an overdraw has been discovered, the player to the right of the overdrawn hand takes the extra dominoes from the overdrawn hand, without looking at them, and returns them to the stock. The deck should then be reshuffled before anyone else draws his hand.

Here is a rule variation that players may agree to employ: Expose the overdrawn tiles to all players before returning them to the stock and then reshuffling the deck.

Not Enough Tiles Are Drawn

If a player draws fewer tiles for his hand than he is entitled to, it is called an underdraw. Once an underdraw has been discovered, he draws the necessary tiles from the stock to complete his hand.

A Domino Is Played In Error

When a player plays the wrong domino, it is called a misplay. If a player misplays (for example, joins a 2 to a 3) and it is discovered before the next player makes his play, he must restore the misplayed tile to his hand and play a correct tile. If a player misplays and no one notices until after the next play has been made, the wrong tile is considered played and cannot be replaced with the correct tile. If a score is realized on the undiscovered misplay, the player is allowed to keep it.

If it is not a misplay, once a tile is played and a player takes his hand off the tile, it may not be taken up by the player.

A Player Plays Out Of Turn

When a player plays out of turn, it is called a misplay. If a player plays out of turn and it is discovered before the next player makes his play, he must recall his tile. If a player plays out of turn and it is not discovered before the next play, the misplay must stand. If a score is realized on the misplay, the player is allowed to keep it.

Types of Domino Games

Nearly all of the most popular domino games fit into one of four categories. The four categories are: bidding games, blocking games, scoring games, and round games.

Bidding Games

Bidding games are card-like games, played by two to four players. In these games, players bid their hands, the highest bidder names the suit, and the score is determined by the bid.

Blocking Games

Blocking games are played by matching dominoes in a line. Scoring is done only at the end of each hand. The player (or team) who plays all the dominoes in his hand first, or "dominoes," scores the total count of the tiles still held by his opponent(s). In the event of a blocked game, the player or team who has the lowest count scores the total count of the tiles still held by his opponent(s).

Scoring Games

A scoring game, like a blocking game, is also played by matching dominoes. One difference is that scoring is done throughout the game after each scoring play is made, as well as at the end of each hand. The game is played until a player or team makes the necessary points to win. A game consists of a series of hands. A hand consists of a series of plays with the dominoes drawn from the deck.

Round Games

Round games are party games, played by three to ten players, in which scoring is usually done at the end of each hand and each hand is usually a game.

Mexican Train

Number of players: 2 - 4

Type of Dominoes Used: Double 9

Type of Game: Blocking Game

Additional equipment: A score sheet and one small marker per player (i.e., penny, dried bean, poker chip, Puremco train markers)

To begin, pull out the 12-12 if playing with a double-12 set (or the 9-9 if playing with a double-9 set) from the deck. This domino is called the "engine" and will be the centerpiece/starter for this game. Place the engine in the center of the table. Shuffle the remaining dominoes face down. Number of tiles drawn: 2 players draw 12 tiles each; 3 players draw 11; 4 players draw 10; 5 players draw 12; 6 players draw 11; 7 players draw 10; and 8 players draw 9. Additional players can play by adjusting this numerical arrangement to fit.

Players draw their number of tiles with the remaining tiles set aside in "bonepiles", to be drawn as needed later in the game.

The players then organize the tiles in their hands in a playable progression beginning with the same number as the engine/centerpiece.

The tile ends must match and form a line to be ready to play as your "personal train" when the game starts (example: 12-5, 5-7, 7-8, 8-11, 11-1, 1-9, and so on). When you are no longer able to line up your tiles in a matching series, the leftover tiles are considered your "extras" and will be used on the "Mexican Train" or on other players' "personal trains" during the game. If you do not draw a domino with an end that matches the engine/centerpiece tile, you can begin the line in your hand with any domino that will make up the longest line of end-matching tiles and the fewest "extras" possible.

To begin the game, choose a player at random to play first and then rotate the starters clockwise thereafter.

The first player must begin by either playing a matching tile from the "line-up" in his hand onto the engine/centerpiece nearest him, so beginning his "personal train", or by playing one of his "extra" dominoes to be the first of the Mexican Train. This Mexican Train is a line of "end-matching" dominoes that can run around the edge of the table or at some side space convenient to all players. The Mexican Train, one's own "personal train", and other player's "personal trains" (when marked) are the options that players can use to rid themselves of their tiles.

The Mexican Train begins with the first tile played by the player who chooses to play a domino from his "extras". It must be a domino whose end is the same as the engine/centerpiece. The train then grows as others play on it, but it can only be played on from the tail end, opposite the end that matches the engine's pips. The "personal trains" are spokes that grow outward from the engine/centerpiece and appear as spokes on a hub. Wooden or plastic hubs are available to conveniently hold the engine and the "personal trains". The number of spokes or "personal trains" coming from the engine are determined by the number of players participating. Spokes can be squeezed in, if more than 8 players are involved, or if Double-15s are used.

It is always wise to start the Mexican Train as soon as possible as it gives more places to play. Try to play your "extra" tiles on the Mexican Train before you play on your "personal train".

After the starter has played one domino, the next player to the left does likewise by playing on the Mexican Train, beginning his own "personal train" leading off from the engine, or playing on another player's "personal train" if it has a marker on it. When a player cannot play on his own "personal train", or on the Mexican Train, or on another player's train, he must draw one tile and try to play it immediately. If unable to do so, the player passes and must put his marker out on the last tile in his "personal train" (even if it has not been started), marking it so that the last number to be matched shows clearly to everyone. Others can play indefinitely on that marked train until the "owner" plays on it and removes the marker. If a player plays a double during play, it is placed sideways and he must then play a second domino somewhere on the table. He does not necessarily need to play on the double he has just played. If he cannot play a second domino, he must draw another tile, then either play it or place his marker on his personal train.

After a double is played, all play is delayed until someone can make a play on this double. It doesn't matter if the next player can play somewhere else or not. He must play a tile on the double tile, even if he has to play a tile out of his train line-up in his hand (This is disrupting, but necessary). If players cannot play a tile on the double tile, they must draw once. If they are still unable to play a tile on the double, they pass and must place their marker on their "personal train" even if they had a matching tile to play on their train before the double was played. This means that once a tile has been played on the double tile, anyone can play on any "personal train" that has a marker on it, although this can really disrupt that train for the owner.

A player can play two doubles, as long as that player is able to play an additional tile from his hand (he is not allowed to draw) on one of those double tiles. This means that a player could play 3 tiles in one turn.

Play then proceeds to the left. When any player is left with just one tile in his hand, he must give notice to the other players by tapping his final tile on the table. This allows other players a chance to lower their score by ridding themselves of a higher numbered tile on their next turn.

General rules: If a player has a tile in his hand that will play, he must play that tile. He may not draw another.

If there are no more tiles in the bonepile, a player must pass if he does not hold a playable tile.

It is possible for a game to end by playing a double alone and no one being able to play on it.

The game is over when one player has dominoed (played his final tile) or when the game is blocked because no one holds a playable tile. Then, all players must count the number of pips on the tiles left in their hands (0, in the case of the player who has dominoed), and give that number - their score - to the scorekeeper.

As soon as the first round is completed, the next game begins by pulling out the 11-11, if playing with a double-12 set, or the 8-8, if playing with a double-9 set. The starter tile is placed in the middle of the table for the engine, and the rest of the deck is shuffled before drawing hands. All "personal trains" and the Mexican Train must be started with this same numbered new tile. Each new game thereafter should begin with the next-lowest double being played as the engine, with the 0-0 tile being the final engine for the last game.

The player with the lowest total score after all the games have been played is the winner.

5 to 8 players using the double-12 set (91 tiles). Adaptations can be easily made should your players/sets not exactly fit this guideline. Double-15 sets (136 tiles) can be used for even larger groups.

Chickenfoot

Number of players: 2 and up

Type of Dominoes Used: Double 9

Type of Game: Blocking Game

What's unique: Two different formations are made: the double chickenfoot and the chickenfoot. The double chickenfoot is made at the beginning of each hand by playing 6 tiles diagonally, 3 on each side, of the set tile. Chickenfoots are made throughout the hand by playing 3 tiles diagonally on one side of a double played during the game. Tiles played diagonally on the double tile are called "chicken-toes." A chickenfoot or a double chickenfoot must have all the chickentoes before any other plays can be made.
Also unique: 50 points are added to your score at the end of a hand if you are left holding the 0-0 tile.

Object of the game: To be the player with the lowest score at the end of the game.

Number of tiles drawn: Each player draws an equal number of tiles from the "chicken yard." For example: If 2 play, each draws 20 tiles; if 8 play, each draws 6 tiles. There are 55 tiles in the set. Tiles left after each player draws remain in the chicken yard to be drawn from during the hand.

Set: Player holding the 9-9 makes the first play of the game. Subsequent games would begin with the next-lowest double tile (8-8; 7-7; 6-6; and so on, the last game beginning with the 0-0 tile). If no one holds the correct double tile to begin that particular hand, players may agree to either 1) go to the next-lowest double (for example, 8-8 in the case of the first play of the game) or 2) reshuffle all the tiles and draw new hands. Play continues to the left.

The next 6 plays must be made on the 9-9 tile, 3 tiles played diagonally on each side of the 9-9 tile. This formation is called a "double chickenfoot." To do this, players must match a tile from their hand of the 9 suit to the 9-9 set tile.

If 6 tiles have not been played on the 9-9 set and a player does not hold a tile from the 9 suit in his hand, he may draw one tile from the chicken yard. If he draws a tile with a 9 end, he plays it on the set tile. If he does not draw a tile from the 9 suit, he must pass his turn to the player on his left.

After 6 tiles have been played on the 9-9 set tile, plays can be made on any of the 6 "chickentoes" by matching tiles end to end, until someone plays a double tile.

Once a double tile has been played on one of the chickentoes, the next three plays must be made on the double tile before plays can be made anywhere else in the layout. This formation of 3 tiles played on the double tile is called a chickenfoot.

Once the new chickenfoot has been completed by playing 3 tiles diagonally on one side of a double tile, players may return to adding tiles to any of the chicken toes until someone plays another double.

The game ends once a player plays all the tiles in his hand or when the game ends in block because none of the players are able to make a play and there are no tiles in the chicken yard to draw from. Players must count the dots on the tiles remaining in their hand (1 point per 1 dot) and record their score. Remember, the player caught having the 0-0 gets 50 points. For the next hand, tiles are reshuffled and each player draws the same number of tiles from the chicken yard as he or she did at the beginning of the previous hand played. The second hand begins with the 8-8 tile; the third hand, with the 7-7 tile; and so on.

For a longer game, players may choose to continue playing by starting another hand with the 1-1 tile following the hand that began with the 0-0 tile as set. Subsequent hands would begin with the next-highest double played as set (2-2; 3-3; and so on, up to the last hand beginning with the 9-9 tile).
