

Mah Jongg FAQs

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions with hints

Playing the Game:

Q. How do we exchange seats when we are playing a four-player game?

A. The original “East” is the Pivot for the Day. After each round, which consists of four games, the pivot changes seats with the player to the right. The pivot takes the dice to the new seat and uses them to determine the number of tiles counted to “break the wall.” After four more hands are played, the same procedure is repeated, with the pivot taking the dice, changing seats with the player on the right, and once again throwing the dice to “break the wall” and begin the next game.

Q. How do we begin a three-player game?

A. Four walls are built. Tiles are dealt only to the three players. There is no Charleston; game begins with East discarding a tile.

Charlestons:

Q. Player elects to stop the Charleston after the 1st left (first Charleston is completed). Charleston is stopped. Can that player who stopped the Charleston still offer any tiles in the optional pass?

A. Yes. The player who stopped the Charleston can still offer 1, 2 or 3 tiles to her opposite player.

Q. May a player stop the passing after the first left (first Charleston is completed), even if she has 3 tiles to pass?

A. Yes. Any player may stop after the first Charleston (after the three compulsory passes) without giving a reason for doing so. The courtesy pass is permitted by all players. Once the second Charleston has been started, then it must be completed with the last pass to the right.

Q. May a Joker be passed in a Charleston?

A. No, never. A player who receives a Joker in the Charleston MUST return it and request a legal tile in its place.

Q. Can a flower be passed in a Charleston?

A. Yes. Any tile may be passed except a Joker.

Q. When playing a 3-player Mah Jongg game, is there a Charleston?

A. No. Four walls are built. Tiles are dealt only to the three players. There is no Charleston; game begins with East discarding a tile.

Q. When may a “blind” pass be used?

A. The blind pass may be used on the third pass of each Charleston only.

Q. What is the penalty for looking at a blind pass?

A. There is no specific penalty for this. It may be a good idea to remind players that they may not do this. It is called a “blind pass” because it is not to be looked at, but merely passed.

Suits:

Q. When a hand is shown using black, red and green colors on the card, what do the colors mean?

A. When a hand is shown in two or three colors, it must be played in any 2 or 3 suits, in any order. When a hand is shown in one color, it is played in one suit only. Always read the explanation in brackets for further clarification.

Note: The colors do not correspond with any particular suits. The different colors are used to show that different suits must be used in a particular hand. If specific suits are required, this will be indicated in words (e.g. Bams & Craks only). Sometimes dragons are specified as follows: R = Red Dragon; Wh = White Dragon; G = Green Dragon.

Further note: When a hand is shown in three colors, the colors can be any of the three suits, as long as they are three different suits. (E.g., red does not designate Craks; green does not designate Bams.)

Q. The white dragon (aka "Soap") is used as a Zero. Does it have to match the symbol tile it is used with?

A. No. The white dragon when used as a Zero is neutral. If used as a Zero, it does not belong nor should it be associated with the Dots.

Q. Referring to this sequence **222 0000 111 7777** (any two suits), do the 2's have to be dots?

A. No. The 2's may be played in Craks, Bams or Dots. A white dragon, when used as a zero, is considered to be neutral and therefore can be used with any suit.

Concealed Hands:

Q. Can you exchange a Joker from an exposure if you are playing a concealed hand?

A. Yes. You may take a Joker from an exposure whether you are playing an exposed or a concealed hand.

Q. If you are playing a Concealed Hand, can you call for the 14th tile if it results in Mah Jongg?

A. Yes. Calling a tile for Mah Jongg is the only time you may pick up a discard when playing a Concealed Hand.

Q. You are playing a Concealed Hand, but call for a discarded tile and make an exposure. What are your options now?

A. You must now try to find a different hand on the card you can play using that same exposure.

Q. You are playing a Concealed Hand, but call for a discarded tile and make an exposure. There are no other hands on the card that can be substituted. (e.g. For example, on the 2018 card, if you expose NNN, SSS, EEE, or WWW under Winds- Dragons, there are no other hands that use those Pungs.) What are your options now?

A. Your hand is "dead." You should not draw attention to the error. You should continue to play until someone challenges your hand. Of course, you cannot win and you will have to pay the winner whatever the appropriate payment is. Your best hope is for a Wall Game — a game which no one wins; therefore, no payment is required.

Numbers:

Q. How do I know when I must use the exact numbers shown and when can I replace them with other numbers?

A. The Mah Jongg card will always indicate if other numbers can be used. Here are some phrases used to show that other numbers can be used: "Any 3 Consecutive Nos.," "Any No. in Any Suit," "Any Like Nos.," (all numbers must be the same), "Any Like Odds," (same odd number used), "Any Like Evens," (same even number used), "Kongs, 3's, 6's or 9's" (the Kongs can be either 3's, 6's or 9's but must be the same number). Unless special notations such as those are given, the numbers shown must be exactly the numbers used.

Q. Can I use a "0" in a consecutive run?

A. No. A zero may never be used in a consecutive run.

Dragons:

Q. The white dragon (aka "Soap") is used as a Zero. Does it have to match the same suit as the symbol tile it is used with?

A. No. The white dragon when used as a Zero is neutral and should not be associated with the Dots.

Picking a Tile:

Note: "Stack" refers to the wall which was pushed out and is currently positioned in the middle of the table. When playing the game, a player either calls a discarded tile or picks a tile from the stack. A "wall" is the row of tiles that is built by each player at the beginning of the game and sits against the back of each player's rack until it is pushed out to become the stack. A "Wall Game" or simply "Wall" refers to a game that ends with no one making Mah Jongg.

Q. When is a player committed to taking a tile from the stack?

A. When a player lifts the tile from the stack or moves it in any way, she has committed to that tile and it is now hers, even if she has not looked at it. If she has merely touched it but not moved it, she may change her mind. Note: If she has not yet racked the tile, another player can still request a discarded tile, and then the player must put her picked tile back on the stack, regardless of whether she has looked at it or not.

Q. When is a tile considered "racked"?

A. A tile is considered to be racked when it is sitting in the sloped area of the rack, along with a player's other tiles. Tapping or clicking the tile is not racking, nor is it considered racked if it is touching any other part of your rack.

Q. When is a player committed to taking a discarded tile from the table?

A. You are committed to a call when you have either exposed tiles from your hand or placed the called tile on top of your rack. If you have picked up the tile, but haven't exposed any tiles or placed the discarded tile on your rack, you can put it back and pick a tile from the stack instead.

Q. A player discards a tile. The next player in turn wants to call that discard for exposure but does not say anything; she simply picks up the discard and makes her exposure. Is this allowed?

A. This is allowed, but should be discouraged. There is no penalty. Play continues. To claim a discard, the player should always verbalize her call letting the others know that she is claiming the discard. She does this by saying, "call," "take," "I want that," etc.

Q. A player has drawn a tile but has NOT racked it. S/he may or may not have looked at it. Can another player call the previous discard?

A. Yes. Until a player has either racked or discarded a picked tile, the previous thrown tile is eligible to be called. The drawn tile should be put back on the stack for the next player to pick, regardless of whether the player has looked at the tile or not.

Q. What happens if I pick a tile from the wrong end?

A. If a tile is taken from the wrong end and racked, the player's hand is dead and the game proceeds from the proper end. If it is noticed that more than one player has picked a tile from the wrong end, the game ceases and the tiles are thrown in.

Discarding a Tile:

Miscalled Tile: A tile cannot be claimed until correctly named. Correctly named tile may then be called for an exposure or Mah Jongg. However, if MJ is called with the incorrectly named tile, the game stops. Miscaller pays claimant 4 times the value of the hand. Others do not pay.

Player discards out of turn: Situation #1: Discarded tile is claimed for Mah Jongg. Game stops and player who discarded out of turn pays winner 4 times the value of the hand. Other players do not pay. Situation #2: Discarded tile is claimed for an exposure. The call is honored and the game continues.

Q. When is it too late to change my mind about discarding a tile?

A. You are committed to discarding a tile once it is fully named or the tile has been placed on the table.

Q. A player has announced a discard but has NOT placed it on the table. May s/he exchange it for an exposed Joker on someone else's rack or change her mind and discard a different tile?

A. No. Once a player has announced the forth-coming discard, it is the same as if the tile were placed on the table. The tile is considered DOWN. In this case, it is too late for this player to redeem a Joker on someone's rack or change it for another tile. Once you announce a tile, you cannot take it back even if it hasn't left your rack. Down is down. Discarder cannot change his/her mind.

Q. A player has two exposures so it may be obvious which tile or tiles may be needed for him/her to declare Mah Jongg. May another player discard a tile knowing that tile is one that may be needed for that player to declare Mah Jongg?

A. Yes. There is no ruling on a "hot" tile but common sense should prevail. If there is very little or no chance that you can win Mah Jongg, it is your best strategy to withhold a tile that could result in another player's MJ. There is only one winner in a MJ game. If you discard a "hot" tile, you may be helping your opponent win.

Hint: It may be better to discard a suspected “hot” tile earlier in the game, rather than later, depending on how close you are for your own Mah Jongg. If the “hot” tile is needed for a pair, the player may not have the other tile required or the player may not be close enough to MJ yet, so may not be able to pick it up. There is more likelihood of the player being closer to MJ later in the game. Sometimes it is difficult to guess which tile the player may need for declaring MJ when only two exposures are up, as most hands require four or more pairs, Pungs or Kongs and there is no way of knowing exactly which tile the player may need. If you are getting close to Mah Jongg yourself, you will need to discard a dangerous tile at some point in order to win, unless that tile would be part of your Mah Jongg as well. If it’s only one tile the player needs to complete Mah Jongg, she may be able to pick it up in any case. It may be impossible to assess how close that player is to winning. If that player discards a Joker, there is a good chance she needs only one tile to win. But sometimes you have to take the chance and discard the tile, if you want to make Mah Jongg for yourself.

Q. A player discards a tile but miscalls it. However, she has the correctly named tile in her hand. Does she take the tile back and instead discard the named tile from her hand?

A. No. Do not replace the tile with the named tile. Miscalled tile is simply correctly named.

Q. If I have discarded a tile and misnamed it, may I take it back and throw the correctly named tile?

A. No. A player may not take back a misnamed tile. Down is down. If the miscalled tile is called for MJ, the miscaller pays 4 times the value of the hand to the claimant. Others do not pay. If the miscalled tile is called causing an invalid exposure, the calling player’s hand is now “dead” and there is no penalty to the discarder for the incorrectly named tile.

Q. Can a discarded tile be picked up from the table to use to redeem a Joker from an exposure?

A. No. A discarded tile can never be called by a player and used to redeem a Joker. A discarded tile can be called only for an exposure or for declaring Mah Jongg.

Exposures:

Pairs and Singles: When an exposed hand contains pairs or singles, you can never call a discarded tile to expose a pair or a single, unless it is the last tile needed to declare Mah Jongg. Please be aware that, the year, such as 2018, and NEWS are considered to be made up of all singles and, therefore, can never be displayed until MJ is declared.

Q. When a player shows two or three exposures, are the tiles to be placed together or separated by a small space?

A. There are no set rules about how to place the exposed tiles on your rack; however, it certainly would seem to be courteous to put a space in between exposures, especially when there are Jokers involved. Note: We prefer that a Joker be placed inside the natural tiles when there is more than one exposure. By doing so, everyone can see which tile the Joker represents. We don’t insist that the exposures show a space, nor do we insist that the exposures be placed in the order shown on the card.

Q. A player calls a flower and exposes it with 3 Jokers. She said she made a mistake and wants to put one of the Jokers back in her hand. She has not discarded a tile yet. Can she put one of the Jokers back in her hand?

A. Yes, this player can make any changes to her exposures, as long as it is still her turn. It is still her turn until she discards. Once she discards, she cannot make any changes to her exposure.

Q. When is a player committed to taking a discarded tile from the table?

A. You are committed to a call when you have either exposed tiles from your hand or placed the called tile on top of your rack.

Q. A player called for a tile but did not pick up the tile yet. She started to make her exposure. Can she change her mind?

A. No. Once a player starts to make an exposure, her commitment is made.

Declaring a Hand "Dead":

Q. When is a hand considered to be "dead"?

A. A hand is considered "dead" if the player has too many or too few tiles. A player should always have 13 tiles, except in the middle of her turn (after picking up and before discarding), as the "dealer" (before discarding the first tile to start the game), and when she has called Mah Jongg. If a player makes an incorrect exposure, declares Mah Jongg in error or is playing a hand not on the current card, her hand is considered "dead." However, it is not the player's responsibility or in their best interests to declare their own hand "dead." They can continue to play until another player challenges them.

Further note: It is recommended that a player should not declare her own hand "dead." If a player announces her own hand to be dead, it is not officially dead until another player verifies that Mah Jongg cannot be made.

Q. If a player has been declared "Dead" by another player and is no longer playing, but notices that another player has a "dead" hand, can that "dead" player declare the other player "dead," or is he no longer considered part of the game?

A. The player who has been declared "dead" cannot, later in the game, declare another player "dead." Technically, he is no longer part of the game and must remain silent. It is really not to his advantage to declare another player "dead," as it would increase the chances for another player to make Mah Jongg. The player with the dead hand sits quietly and hopes for a "Wall Game."

Q. What happens when a player is challenged about a "dead" hand, but insists the hand is not dead and continues to pick and discard?

A. At the end of the game, whether it ends in Mah Jongg or a Wall Game, if the challenged hand was incorrect, the penalty for continuing to play is the lowest amount on the card given to the original challenger (usually 25 cents). If the challenged hand is correct, then the challenger pays the challengee the lowest amount on the card. If Mah Jongg was declared, it is paid in the usual way.

Q. There are 2 exposures on a rack and only one hand could be played. Three of the needed pair are shown on the table as discards or in another exposure. What happens?

A. One of the other players COULD and SHOULD declare that player "dead." That player would discontinue picking and discarding, thereby giving the other players more picks for themselves and a better chance to declare Mah Jongg. If the mistake was noticed at the time an exposure was made, any Jokers used in that exposure are no longer available to be exchanged. If the mistake was not noticed until later in the game, any Jokers displayed can still be claimed by other players as they were exposed before the hand was declared "dead."

Q. You realize that your hand is incorrect. Should you announce that your hand is incorrect or “dead”?

A. No. You should not announce that your hand is incorrect. However, if any of your opponents notice your error and point it out, you should admit it and immediately stop playing. If you do not, the penalty for continuing to play is to pay the challenger the lowest amount on the card (usually 25 cents).

Q. Can you redeem a Joker from a “dead” hand?

A. Yes. You may exchange Jokers from any exposures that were made before the hand was declared “dead.” Once a hand is declared “dead,” any Jokers that were exposed at the same time as that declaration cannot be redeemed as that is when the error was made. These Jokers, along with any other tiles which were exposed as part of the dead hand, are to be returned to the player’s rack. Only the exposure (or exposures) made prior to the hand being called dead should remain on top of the rack.

If the hand was not declared dead until later, all the Jokers exposed could be redeemed.

Jokers:

Discarding a Joker: A discarded Joker is a “dead” tile and cannot be picked up.

Hint: If it is close to the end of the game and you know it is impossible for you to win, discard a Joker instead of a symbol tile as it cannot be claimed by another player. There’s a better chance that the game will end in a Wall which is a better strategy for you.

Q. What is the correct way to make a Joker exchange?

A. It is recommended that a player never touch another player’s tiles. The player should first announce that an exchange is to be made. The replacement tile should be handed to the player whose rack contains the Joker and that player makes the exchange and hands the Joker to the other player.

Q. Can I do a Joker exchange before I pick or call a tile?

A. No. You may not first exchange a symbol tile for a Joker and then use that Joker to call the last discard for either exposure or Mah Jongg. You may only do a Joker exchange when it is your turn, and your turn does not begin until you pick or call your 14th tile.

Q. When discarding a Joker, what do you name it?

A. You may name it “Joker,” “Same,” or you may name it the same as the previous discard (e.g. a Flower was discarded previous to you, so you can name it “Flower.”) We recommend that you name it the same as the previous discard so you are not calling attention to the fact that you are discarding a Joker. It is each player’s responsibility to be alert, watching the discards as well as listening for discards.

Q. Can a Joker be used for a single or a pair?

A. A Joker can NEVER be used for a single or a pair. Note: Years, such as 2018, and NEWS are made up of all singles, so you should be aware that no Jokers can be used for them, and you cannot pick up any single for exposure unless it is the last tile needed for MJ. The only groupings where Jokers can be used are in Pungs, Kongs, Quints or Sextets which are groups of identical tiles. When dissimilar tiles are grouped together without spaces, these tiles are not exposable sets and therefore Jokers can never be used. Examples: 336 is not a Pung, 33669 is not a Quint, 336699 is not a Sextet.

Q. When playing a concealed hand, can you exchange a tile for a Joker from anyone's exposure, even your own?

A. Yes. You may always exchange a tile for a Joker, regardless of whether you are playing a concealed or an exposed hand. If you are playing a concealed hand, you will have no exposures until declaring Mah Jongg, unless you have switched and are no longer pursuing a concealed hand.

Q. Can you exchange a tile for a Joker at any time in the game, or does it have to be the last tile you draw to complete a Mah Jongg?

A. You may exchange a tile for a Joker at any time during the game when it is your turn. First, you must pick up a tile from the stack, exchange any tiles for Jokers, then discard. If you are claiming a discarded tile, you must first pick up the tile and show an exposure on your rack. After that, you can exchange a tile for a Joker, then discard. You cannot claim a Joker until after you have picked up.

Q. Can you substitute 3 Jokers for a Pung, 4 Jokers for a Kong or 5 Jokers for a Quint (without having a "natural" tile) when you call Mah Jongg to win a game?

A. You may use all Jokers for a Pung, Kong or Quint when declaring Mah Jongg. It is not necessary to have any "natural tiles" in a Pung, Kong or Quint.

Q. Do you need to have at least one natural tile in your hand in order to call for a tile to make a Pung, Kong or Quint?

A. No. You may pick up the "natural tile" and use Jokers from your hand to complete the Pung, Kong or Quint.

Q. May a Joker be passed in a Charleston?

A. No, never. A player who receives a Joker in the Charleston MUST return it and request a legal tile in its place.

Q. One player says "7 Crak." The next player says "Same" and puts down a Joker. Now the next player says she wants the 7 Crak. Which tile can she take?

A. Neither. You may never pick up a Joker from the table. A Joker, when discarded, is a "dead" tile. All players should always watch the table for discards as well as listening. The original 7 Crak which was discarded can no longer be called, as the next player has already picked and discarded.

Q. A player had an exposure of three 5 Bams with one Joker. Another player discarded a 5 Bam. Can another player pick up the 5 Bam to exchange for the Joker?

A. No. You cannot pick up a discard to redeem a Joker in an exposure. You may pick up a discard for one purpose only — to make an exposure on your rack.

Q. May we exchange more than one Joker at a time?

A. Yes. When it is your turn and after you have picked up, you may redeem as many Jokers as you can from as many racks as you can.

Q. When it is a player's turn, she makes an exchange by requesting the Joker from an exposure and replacing it with a symbol tile. Before she places the Joker in her hand, she changes her mind and wants to put the Joker back. Can she do so?

A. No. Once you make an exchange, you have already made your play and made a commitment.

Q. Can a Joker be used in place of a tile in the year (e.g. 2018)?

A. No. A Joker can never be used to represent a tile for a single or a pair. (2018 is considered to be made up of all singles.)

Q. Can a tile be called to expose a year (e.g. 2018)?

A. Yes, but only if it's the last tile needed to declare Mah Jongg. Otherwise, no. The year is considered to be single tiles grouped together.

Mah Jongg called:

Verifying Mah Jongg: When Mah Jongg is declared, no player should throw in their hand until it has been verified. If one player does throw in their hand and it turns out that the MJ has been called in error, a Wall game is no longer possible. Therefore, that player is responsible for stopping the game and wrong to do so. The player who threw in their hand must pay the two remaining players the lowest amount on the card (usually 25 cents).

Q. Can I call a single tile for Mah Jongg?

A. Yes. A single tile can always be called for Mah Jongg, even when playing a concealed hand.

Q. Who gets the Mah Jongg when two players declare Mah Jongg at once?

A. If two players call a tile for Mah Jongg simultaneously, the player next in turn (nearest the discarder) gets the preference.

Q. Player A exposed two 9 Dots and a Joker. Player B drew a 9 Dot, replaced Player A's Joker, then called Mah Jongg using the Joker to complete the hand. Did Player B draw it herself (all players pay her double), or did Player A give it to her since it was her Joker which enabled Player B to complete Mah Jongg (only Player A pays double)?

A. Player B, by exchanging the Joker and declaring Mah Jongg, is entitled to be paid double by all players, as she made her own Mah Jongg, which is the same as if she had picked a Joker from the stack.

Q. Player #3 called Mah Jongg on a discarded tile, but did not put up her exposure yet. Then Player #2 (next in turn) said that discard was her Mah Jongg. Who is entitled to the tile?

A. Just as long as Player #3 had NOT started to make any exposure as yet, next in turn (Player #2) would be entitled to the Mah Jongg.

Q. A player discarded a tile that I want to call for Mah Jongg. However, in order to call for that discard, I would need to exchange a symbol tile in my hand for an exposed Joker. May I make that exchange and then call for the discard?

A. No. You must be able to pick up the discard and make your full exposure WITHOUT the help of the exposed Joker. Your Joker exchange always comes after you call for the discard or pick a tile from the stack.

Q. A tile is called for exposure, the exposure is made, and then the player makes an exchange for a Joker. That Joker resulted in Mah Jongg. Who pays double?

A. The discarder of the tile was not responsible for the Mah Jongg. The exchange of the Joker resulted in the Mah Jongg. The exchange is considered self-picked and the winner receives double value from all players.

Q. I discarded a 3 Bam and the next player in turn also discarded a 3 Bam. The 3 Bam was then called for Mah Jongg. Who pays double value?

A. The second discarder pays double value as the first 3 Bam was not picked up.

Q. A player declared Mah Jongg. S/he did not have any Jokers. How is payment made?

A. A player must announce the value of her own hand. If another player calls her attention to the fact that the hand is "pure" (without Jokers) and should be paid double, the winner is only entitled to the limit she has called for. Note: This might be considered a bit harsh. Against extreme competitors, you may wish to enforce this rule. Among friends, you may wish to be a little more forgiving. 😊

Q. Do I get a jokerless bonus for a SINGLES AND PAIRS hand?

A. No. The bonus is already built into the value of those hands.

Mah Jongg called in error:

Without Penalty: If a player calls Mah Jongg in error and the mistake is immediately rectified before the hand is exposed and before any other players expose or disturb their hand, the game continues without penalty.

Verifying Mah Jongg: When Mah Jongg is declared, no player should throw in their hand until it has been verified. If one player does throw in their hand and it turns out that the MJ has been called in error, a Wall game is no longer possible. Therefore, that player is responsible for stopping the game and wrong to do so. The player who threw in their hand must pay the two remaining players the lowest amount on the card (usually 25 cents).

Q. If a tile is called for Mah Jongg, the hand is exposed and the Mah Jongg is in error, is that tile "dead" or can someone else call for it?

A. That tile is part of the dead hand and cannot be called by another player. Exception: If that tile was called for Mah Jongg by two players simultaneously, and the player next in turn has called Mah Jongg in error, that tile is given to the second player who declared Mah Jongg at the same time.

Q. A player called a Flower for an exposure but picked up a 1 Bam in error. None of the other players noticed her error and play continued. This player declared Mah Jongg and then the error was noticed. Is that player "dead"?

A. Yes. It is each individual player's responsibility to pick up the correct tile when making an exposure. The player had an incorrect exposure when they declared MJ and therefore, their hand is dead.