

Lesson 1: Three Basic Chords: Em, E & Am

Your Mission: Learn how to finger these three chords and how to switch between them comfortably.

Below and to the right, you see a Chord Diagram for a chord called **E Minor**, abbreviated **Em**. This is the easiest to play of the most common guitar chords. The diagram includes:

- (1) Vertical lines that indicate the strings;
- (2) Horizontal lines that indicate the fret wires;
- (3) A thicker line at the top that shows the nut;
- (4) The letter **O** above the open strings; and
- (5) Circled numbers that indicate fingers, namely:

- 1 Index Finger
- 2 Middle Finger
- 3 Ring Finger
- 4 Little Finger

This diagram tells you to use your 2nd and 3rd fingers to hold down both the 5th and 4th strings at the 2nd fret, and you are supposed to play all 6 strings.

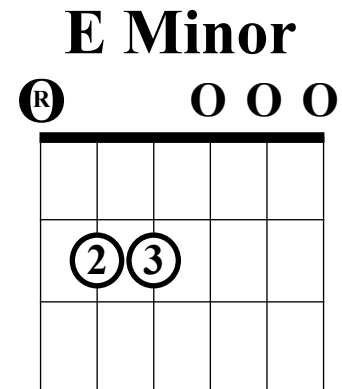
Now, play the same chord using the 1st and 2nd fingers. You would choose one form over the other depending on what other chord you may be **coming from** or **going to**.

- (1) Arch your fingers to avoid muting open strings.
- (2) Keep them as close to the fret wire as possible, where the contact will be strongest and the note will ring out most clearly.

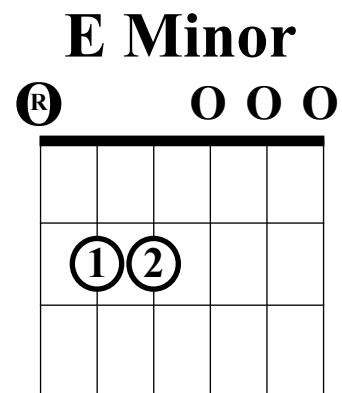
(3) This chord is named after the **E note** because it has the strongest presence in the chord. The deepest note in the chord, the open 6th string, is an **E note**, and it's called the **Root Note** of the chord (the "**R**") because it holds up the rest of the chord like a root holds up a plant.

(4) All things being equal, we prefer to hear the lowest **Root Note** in the bass region of a chord, so you should sound all 6 strings when you strum the **Em** chord.

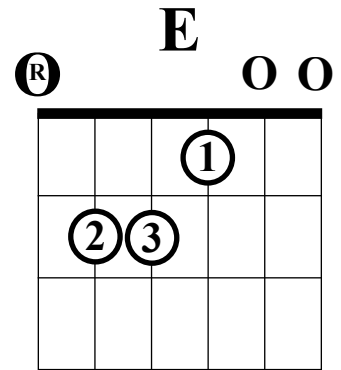
(4) The term **Minor Chord Quality** refers to the heavy, melancholy feeling that the **Em** chord projects.



Let your pick or thumb glide over the strings in this direction, from the 6th string to the 1st.



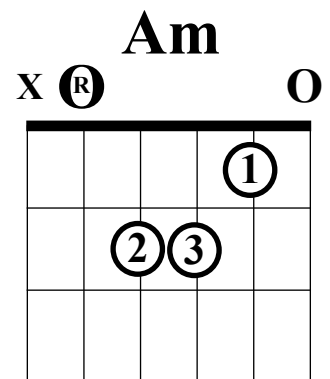
Let's add a second, more important **Chord Quality** with the **E Major** chord, or simply **E**. (If there is only one letter identifying a chord, figure the Chord Quality is Major.)



Take the first fingering for **Em** and add the 1st finger to the 1st fret of the 3rd string. That single change turns the sad Minor chord into a happy Major chord.

The next chord to be added is **A Minor**, or **Am**. Since this chord has a **Minor** Chord Quality, it conveys the same somber mood as **Em**.

This chord has the same *shape* as the **E Major** chord, as far as the grouping of your fingers is concerned, but notice that the fingers occupy a *higher* (closer-to-the-floor) set of strings, the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strings. Again, higher means higher *in pitch*.



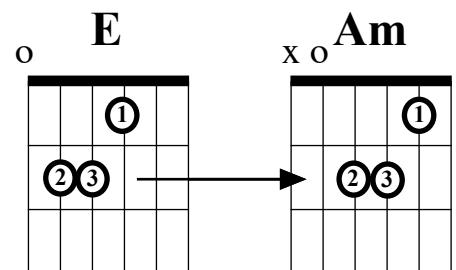
This new chord gives us a new Root Note, **A**, and our lowest **A** note is on the *open 5th string*, so that's the string we really want to hear open in the bass, *not the 6th string (Xed out)*.

Try to *avoid* hitting the 6th string as you strum (not easy to do), or reach over the top of the fretboard with your left thumb to *mute* it to keep it from ringing. Just touch it, don't press.

Try to switch chords as efficiently as possible, with the least amount of wandering. Keep your fingers close to the strings on the way; the farther they fly away, the longer it will take to get them back, and for some changes, you can't afford the delay.

When you're *switching* from **E** to **Am** and back, keep your fingers bunched together in that shape, and you'll be more likely to stick the landing:

This is called moving your fingers *as-a-unit*.

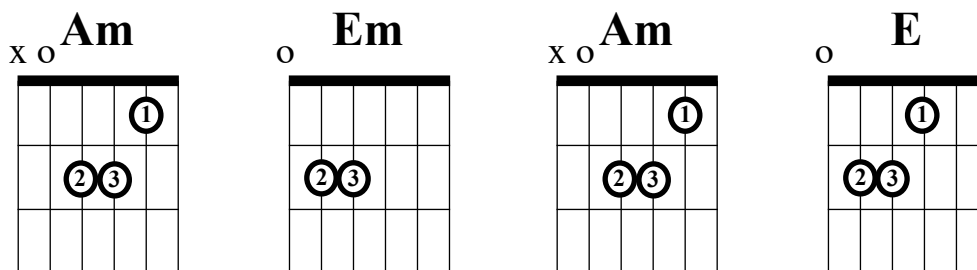


Strumming. There are 2 types of strokes: **Downstrokes** and **Upstrokes**. Downstrokes (**D**) should be heavier and fuller; try to hit all the strings. But Upstrokes (**U**) can be lighter, and you might catch just a few of the treble strings. Keep a steady **Down-Up** motion. One **Down-Up** cycle will take one **beat** or **count**.

Playtime

Play each of the chords in this sequence 4 times. No rush, but keep it even. Focus on the Downstroke mostly, but if you want to slip in an Upstroke between two Downstrokes, keep the pick perpendicular to the strings and let it flex.

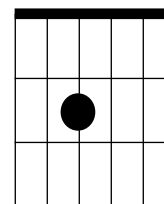
Repeat the entire sequence until you feel comfortable with it.



We'll start to use the symbol **4x** for the 4 times, or beats, that you played each chord. So we can abbreviate the chord sequence this way:

Am^{4x} **Em**^{4x} **Am**^{4x} **E**^{4x} Starting Note

Try another song, "What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor?" Play a Downstroke every time the chord symbol appears over a lyric. To sing the melody, you need to match your voice to the Starting Note, which is the note on the 4th string at the 2nd fret, in the **Am** chord:



Play 2 or 3 repetitions of this song slowly and evenly:

Am **Am** **Am** **Am** **Em** **Em** **Em** **Em**
What shall we do with the drunken sailor? *What shall we do with the drunken sailor?*

Am **Am** **Am** **Am** **Em** **Em** **Am** **Am**
What shall we do with the drunken sailor, *early in the morn - ing?*

So the formula for this song is: **Am**^{4x} **Em**^{4x} **Am**^{4x} **Em**^{2x} **Am**^{2x}

Now go to YouTube and find REM's "Losing My Religion," and skip past the intro. Here's the formula for most of the verse starting from the first lyric (*Oh, life*):

Am^{8x} **Em**^{8x} **Am**^{8x} **Em**^{8x} **Am**^{8x} **Em**^{8x}

Now try shifting the **Am/E** shape to a **higher position**: Play 4 beats of **Am**, then shift your fingers **2 frets** up the neck and play 4 more beats. Switch to **E**, play 4 beats, then shift your fingers **1 fret** up the neck and play 4 more beats.

BONUS

