

Mastering Stubborn Barre Chords

By Chris Liepe and the staff at [JamPlay, LLC](#)

The moment when the intense cramp in your hand reaches a crescendo and your grip fails, filling the room with an unpleasantly raucous noise. This is a moment most guitar players have experienced, perhaps only once for some, but over and over for many others. This is the grueling process of **learning to play barre chords**.



All you intermediate to advanced players who have years of Barre Chords under your belt, you can politely ignore these first few pages... we want to be sure the beginners understand a few basics before piling into more advanced tips.

For you rookies out there who haven't had the pleasure of trying one yet, a **barre chord** is a chord in which you use your index finger, or first finger, to hold down multiple strings across the fretboard. This generally constitutes your first finger pressing down five or six strings, there are of course variations but we will not worry about these for now. The main advantage from playing barre chords is derived from the ability to move the chord shape up and down the neck, without worrying about the open strings.

The two most commonly used barre chords are the E shape and A shape. There are of course other variations which eventually leads into the CAGED system of guitar playing, which you can see covered in some of our online guitar lessons.

If you look at the diagram of the E shape barre chord to the left, you can see that the index finger is covering all six strings. That is the barre which makes this chord considered a barre chord.

For example, picture yourself playing a regular G major chord. Now move that exact shape up the neck one fret. Notice the awful, dissonant cacophony you are greeted with? That's because you are only fretting three (or four notes, depending on how you play it). When you move these three notes up the neck, the open strings are all still resonating, creating dissonance. The barre chord allows you to move an entire shape around the full fretboard, while keeping the harmonious sound of your

instrument intact. The name of the chord will change as you move it around, but if you are playing a major chord shape, it will still be a major chord. Don't worry if this doesn't make sense at first, it can take some time to understand barre chords and movable chord shapes!

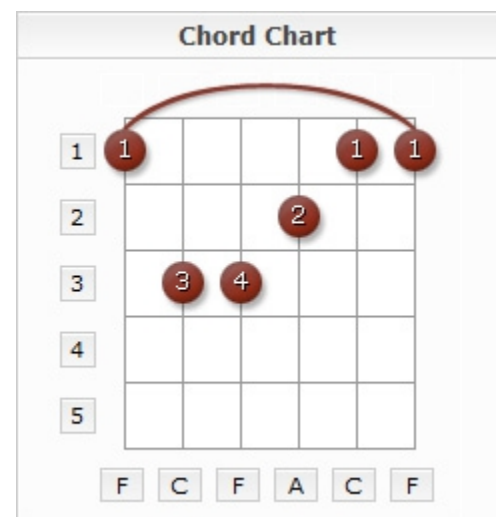
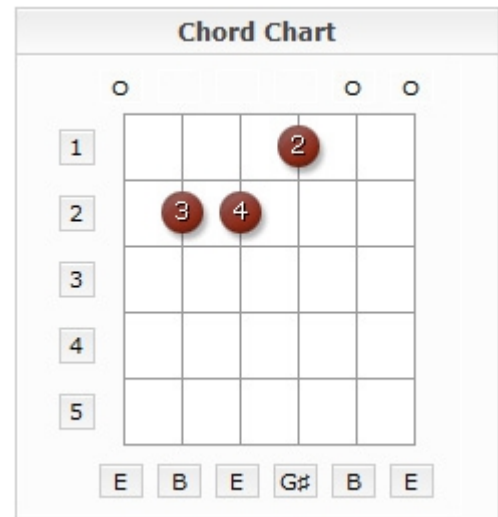
The E Shaped Barre Chord

This is one of the most commonly used barre chords, it is fairly easy to understand and not that difficult to play. The E Shape Barre chord gets its name from the E major open chord shape. If you glance to the right, you can see a chord chart demonstrating the shape of the open chord. Normally, many individuals finger this different, using the first, second and third fingers, however this fingering is necessary when the index finger is required for the barre.

Finger and play this shape on your guitar, and get comfortable with it. Make sure all six strings are ringing out without any excessive buzzing or alternatively muting. Once that is mastered, move this entire shape up one fret. This would put your second finger on the second fret of the G string (3rd string), and your third and fourth fingers on the third fret of the A string (5th) and D string (4th). Now play the chord. Can you hear how much different it sounds? It's not exactly an ugly sound this time, but it certainly is no longer a major chord.

Now, to make this chord complete, we will add the barre. If you look at the image to the right, you will see that all of the fingers stay in the same position, aside from the first finger, which is now covering all six strings on the first fret. Now strum all six strings. Don't worry if at first some of the strings don't ring out, or if your hand tires quickly. We will talk a bit about properly playing this chord and exercises that can be done to improve playing later.

For now get used to the shape, and the idea in your head of using one finger to play six strings. Notice how the chord sounds right when strummed compared to not using the first finger to create a barre. It is now a major chord, which is what we were intending to play in the first place.



Naming Barre Chords

This is a point of confusion for nearly everyone at first. If it is called an E shape barre chord, why does it become an F when moved one fret up the neck? That makes no sense! Don't worry, it's not nearly as difficult as it sounds. When you refer to the E shape barre chord, you are only referring to the shape your second, third and fourth fingers make when playing an E major open chord. When the chord is moved one fret up the neck, those three fingers are still in that shape, meaning for brevity's sake it can still be called an E shape barre chord. That is only the name of the shape though, not the chord itself.

The name of the chord itself, in this case F major, comes from the root of the chord. The root note in this chord is on the sixth string or E string. When the E major chord is played in the open position, you strum all six strings, making the open E string the root note. This of course makes it obvious that the note played is an E, giving the chord the name E major. When you move up the fretboard, the first fret is an F making the chord an F major open chord. The second fret would be F# major, third fret G major, fourth fret G# major, fifth fret A Major and so on. Once you are able to differentiate between the name of the shape and the name of the chord barre chords become much less confusing.

That's Great. I Can't Freaking Play It Cleanly.

Before proceeding with the instruction on playing barre chords, it is prudent to mention a quick note regarding guitar setup. Barre chords are hard for any new player, there is no denying that. It requires a level of strength and dexterity in the hand, wrist and forearm that very few possess without practice and dedication. It hurts, is uncomfortable and takes a lot of practice. But it is not impossible.

However, for some people, playing a clear sounding barre chord seems perpetually out of reach. The reason for that is likely not their playing technique or strength, but rather an issue with the guitar itself. If the action of the guitar, the distance between the strings and fretboard, is too high it can make playing barre chords nearly impossible. The same can be said for guitars of a pathetically low quality. If barre chords are proving impossible for you, there are a few things you should try to remedy the situation before throwing the guitar down in a furious rage.

1.) Check Your String Gauge

Often, especially on acoustics, the guitars can come from the factory with a set of strings that are fairly thick and difficult to play. This is done because it creates a richer tone, however they can make it highly difficult for new players, or seasoned players with weaker hands, to play. Try going one set of strings lighter, and see if that helps. You may even try two, but depending on your guitar, that may require a setup as the tension of the strings on your

guitar will change. The lighter strings will make everything easier to play, from bends to barre chords, which can be a real boon to a new player. The sound quality may suffer to some small degree, but after a few hours you won't even notice the difference.

2.) **Be Sure Your Guitar Setup is Accommodating.**

A proper setup will make any guitar easier to play, improve intonation and give an all around premium experience. If you follow the advice above and switch to a set of strings that is significantly lighter, a setup may be necessary to keep proper tune. It is highly recommended that you visit a guitar shop, tell their technician what kind of music you are playing and give him information on any problems you are having, and get the proper string gauge for you and a proper setup.

3.) **Consider a Different Guitar**

Suggesting a new guitar to remedy playing problems is generally the worst advice one can give, however in this situation it may be prudent. If you have a really cheap guitar, something that was under \$100 new, and new strings and a good setup have not fixed things, a new guitar may be in your future. It is still recommended that you visit someone who knows the guitar well, and show them how you are attempting to play barre chords, and have them advise you on whether the problem is with your technique or your instrument. If the problem does turn out to be your instrument, and a setup and new strings have failed, it may be time to buy a new guitar... and this time spend a little bit more.

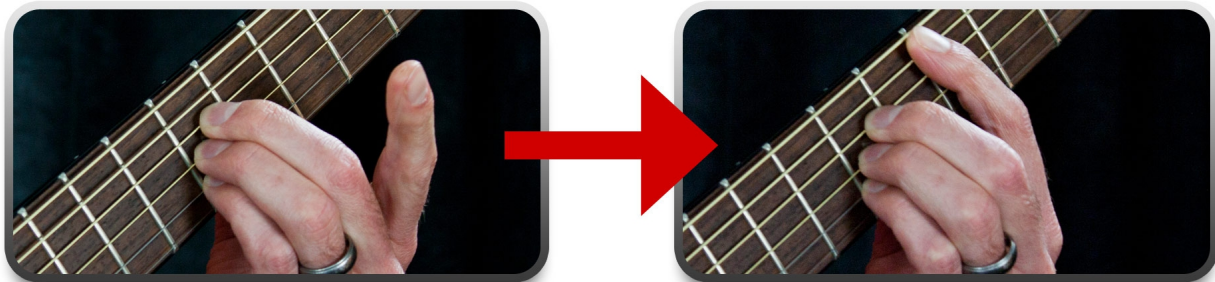
(JUICY TIPS COMING)

Ok My Guitar is Fine, Give me Advice Chris!

It is highly likely that if this is your first time playing barre chords your first finger will either be hurting, not properly holding down all of the strings or causing an awful lot of either unwanted buzzing or unwanted muting. Don't worry, these things are normal! Here are a few tips and ideas which can help make this process easier.

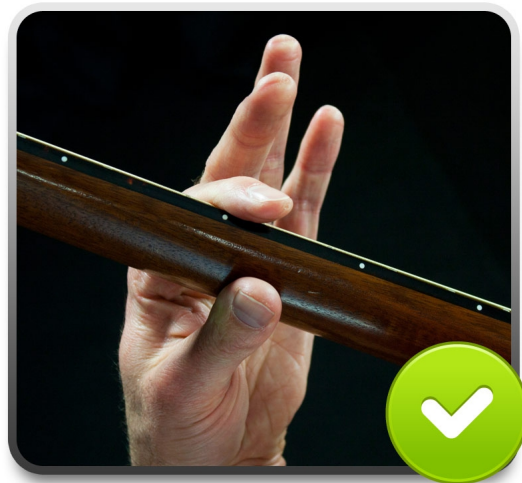
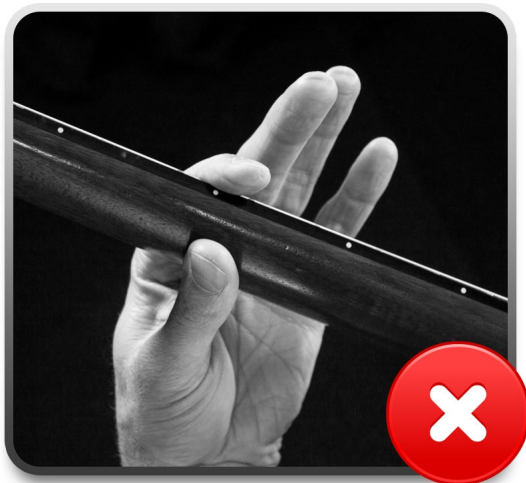
Build The Chord

Form non-barre notes of the chord first and add the index last instead of first. This helps with stretching and muscle memory. It also makes chord transitions easier when you are playing songs.



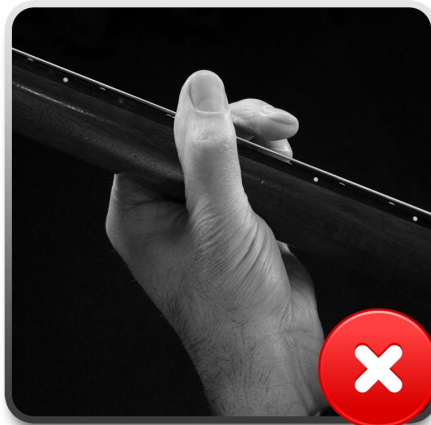
Tilt the Index Finger!

Many players have a tendency to keep the index finger (the barring finger) completely flat. It's much better if you tilt your index finger slightly the direction of the nut and the lower frets. This allows better contact of the index finger to the strings and fretboard and uses the muscle in your arm more efficiently.



Keep Your Thumb in a Power Position.

When playing barre chords on the guitar you really must keep your thumb in the proper spot so your hand can act as a clamp, which will make it easier to get the desired grip. Try to keep your thumb towards the middle of the neck, roughly where the second finger is on the fretboard. Also don't forget to have your wrist arched so your second, third and fourth fingers aren't laying flat on the fretboard. It will take some experimentation to find exactly what works for you, but these guidelines should help.



Check Your Posture.

Use proper posture that allows more of the side of your finger to make the barre. Using the side of your finger avoids the finger joints which are built in buzz makers. Be sure to bring your thumb behind your index finger on the back of the neck.

Mind Your Strings.

Remember you don't actually need to play all six strings with the index finger. When it was said to play all six strings with the index finger, that advice was mostly to help illustrate what a barre chord is. In the

example of the E shape, your finger really only needs to be playing the low E string (6th), G string (2nd) and high e string (3rd). This means you only need to focus the pressure from the finger on those particular notes. There will be other barre chords covered in the future where the index finger realistically only needs to keep two notes compressed.



Be Patient. Be Accurate.

For some people that might mean a week or two, and for others it can be months. Don't get discouraged and think that you won't be able to play them because of the size or shape of the hands, or how weak you feel at any given time. Anyone can play barre chords, it just takes practice, perseverance and that "can do" attitude. These **will take time** to master.



Build Strength.

This exercise may not be for everyone, but it helped me build the strength to play barre chords better and hold them longer quite rapidly. Place your index finger (and only your index finger, no chords here!) across the 9th fret on the fretboard, covering all six strings. Press down, and play each string individually until you manage to get all of the strings ringing out. Hold this position for as long as you can. This will build up strength in your hand and cement the proper positioning into your muscle memory. Once you are able to do this on the 9th fret quite easily, move on to the 7th fret, then the 5th fret, on and on until you are able to master this exercise upon the first fret. This ability to do this well and hold the position for a long period of time will certainly not come overnight, but it will help build up the strength required playing barre chords.

Mind the Pressure.

Don't psych yourself out. You probably think barre chords are hard and that can have a major effect on tension. Too much tension when playing barre chords will reduce your stamina and your hand will cramp up much quicker. It is better to do it right 3 times, than wrong 30. Play them accurately as best as you can today... and repeat that tomorrow. After a few weeks, your hands will naturally start to adapt to the chord, the strength required, and the stamina needed to perform them reliably.

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