

American Mahjong Tile Counting & Draw Odds



Learn to count visible tiles and estimate your odds — so you can make smarter decisions about keeping, waiting, or pivoting your hand.

Know Your Numbers

Most standard American mahjong sets have four copies of each numbered, Wind and Dragon tile.

Tile Type	Total Copies
Each Dot (1–9)	4
Each Bam (1–9)	4
Each Crak (1–9)	4
Each Wind (E, S, W, N)	4
Each Dragon (Red, Green, White)	4
Flowers	1 each (or 2 in some sets)



KEY POINT

Once you know what tiles are visible (your rack, discards, exposed melds, opponent's shown tiles), you can calculate how many copies remain unseen in the wall.

How Many Are Still Out There?

- 1 Know the total**
Start with 4 copies of any tile.
- 2 Count visible tiles**
 - In your rack?
 - Discarded?
 - Exposed in an opponent's meld?
 - In an opponent's hand (if you've seen it)?
- 3 Do the math**
 $\text{Total copies (4)} - \text{visible copies} = \text{unseen copies}$

Example: You need the 5 Bam.

- You have 1 in your rack
- You can see 1 discarded
- An opponent has 1 exposed in a meld
- $4 \text{ total} - 3 \text{ visible} = 1 \text{ unseen}$

What Do Your Numbers Mean?

Unseen Copies	Status	Your Decision
4 unseen	Very Live	Keep pursuing this tile
3 unseen	Good	Hand is realistic
2 unseen	Getting Tighter	Stay alert
1 unseen	Difficult	Consider pivoting
0 unseen	Dead	Move on — tile is gone

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The Basic Odds Formula

To estimate your chance of drawing a specific tile on your next turn:

$$N \div U = \text{Approximate odds}$$

Where:

- N = Number of unseen copies of the tile you need
- U = Approximate unseen tiles remaining in the wall

Example:

- 2 copies of your tile remain unseen
- Approximately 90 tiles remain in the wall
- $2 \div 90 = 0.022$ = roughly a 2% chance
- That's approx. 1-in-50 chance on your next draw

Remember: These are approximate — they assume a roughly equal distribution of tiles.

Why Tile Counting Matters

Tile counting helps you answer critical questions:

- ✓ Is this hand still realistic, or should I pivot?
- ✓ Should I keep waiting, or reset from?
- ✓ Is this opponent's hand becoming dangerous?
- ✓ Is a tile I'm holding actually worth keeping?
- ✓ Are my odds improving or getting worse?
- ✓ When should I fold this hand?

Tile Counting in Action

SCENARIO 1: Hand is Still Alive

- 3 unseen copies of your key tile
- Fewer than 50 tiles left in wall
- Only 1 opponent lacks close to Mah Jongg
- Decision: Keep building this hand

SCENARIO 2: Hand is Getting Tight

- 1 unseen copy of required tile
- 60+ tiles left in wall
- Multiple opponents passing aggressively
- Decision: Consider pivoting to a backup hand

SCENARIO 3: Opponent is Dangerous

- Opponent has exposed 2 melds already
- Only needs 1 more meld + pair
- You see 2 of their key tiles
- Decision: Block/protect; play defensive

Reading Your Odds

Approx. Odds	Translation	Meaning
20%+	1 in 5 or better	Favourable chance
5–20%	1 in 20 to 1 in 5	Moderate chance
2–5%	1 in 50 to 1 in 20	Low chance
<2%	Less than 1 in 50	Very unlikely

Don't Count Only Your Tiles

What to Watch	Why It Matters
Tiles needed by opponents	Are they close to Mah Jongg?
Dead tiles	(Already discarded 3+ times) — avoid these
Exposed groups	Tells you what's not in the wall
Repeated discards	Pattern shows what players don't need
Hidden tiles	Tells if set help multiple hands

Quick Tile Counting Tips

- ✓ Start counting early in the hand
- ✓ Update your count as new tiles are discarded
- ✓ Watch for an opponent stepping or changing strategy
- ✓ Use your count to decide when to pivot, not just when to pursue