Chop Chords

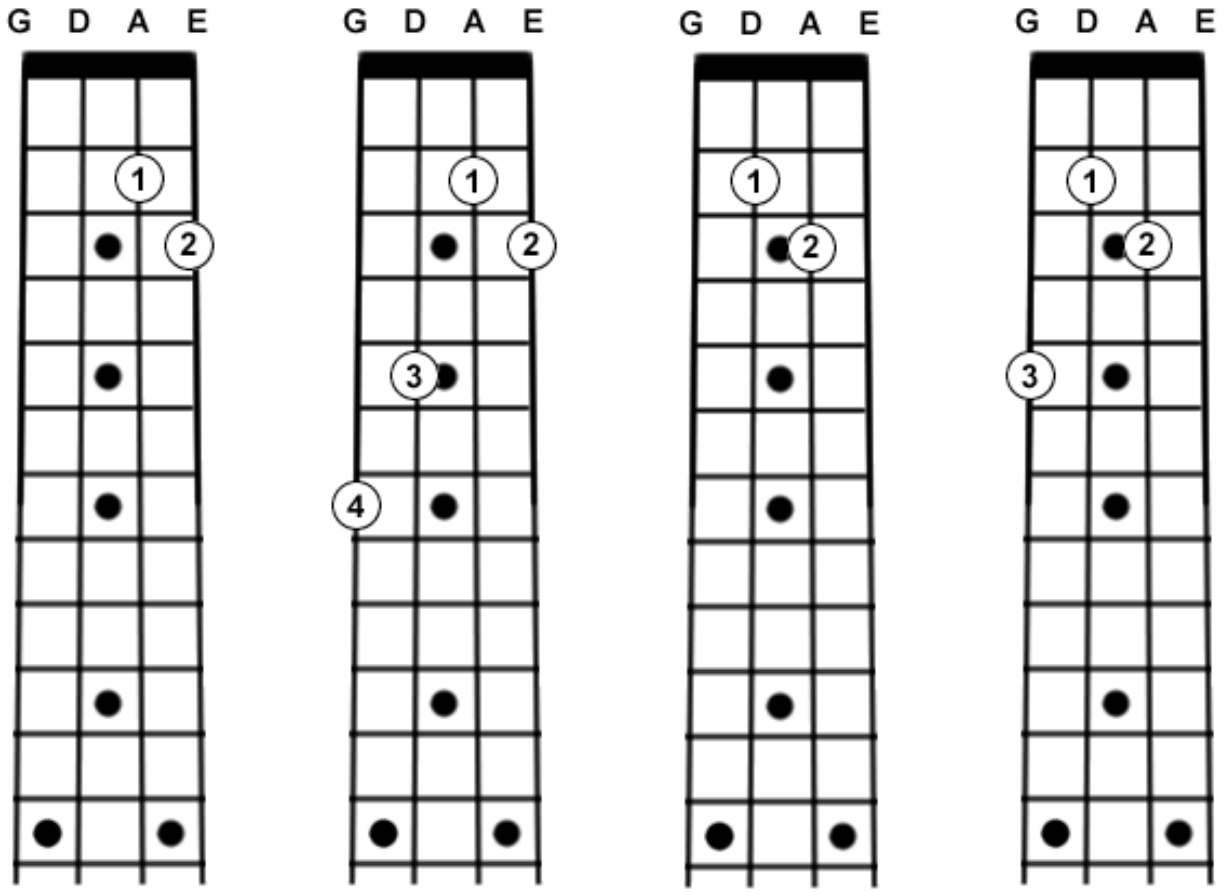
MandoLessons Lesson Supplement

The chop chord is one of the most important and defining aspects of bluegrass mandolin technique. Bill Monroe, the "father" and innovator behind bluegrass, developed the chop chord to add a sharp, percussive accent to the music he and his band was playing. In many ways the chop chord takes on the role of the drums that would be found in a rock band. The mandolin uses the percussive "chop" sound on the offbeats, whereas the upright bass would play on the beat. Many songs, especially in bluegrass, are in 4/4 time, which means there are four beats per measure and a quarter note defines the beat. Don't get bogged down with the music theory though, what is important is the sound that is produced. Once again, the best way to get a feel for the use of the chop chord is to listen to a lot of bluegrass and to jump right in and play along with recordings and friends. Watch the lesson video and you will catch on very quickly.

One of the most important aspects of the chop chord is that no open strings are played. If you play the G chord that you already know, the bottom (lowest in pitch) four strings are not fretted by your fingers and are allowed to ring openly. With a chop chord, you usually play either three or four note chords and each note (you can also think of notes as strings) you play is assigned a finger, and no open ringing notes (or strings) are played.

Chop chords are derived from the chords you already know and just involve more fingers (and often a little bit of a stretch). Lets take a look at the G chord and the G chop chord right next to one another to see the differences and similarities.

As you can see in the diagrams below, the four highest (in pitch) strings of the chop chord are fingered the exact same way as the open G chord you already know. The only difference is the 4 lowest (in pitch) strings. The open D string is fretted at the 5th fret, and the open G string is fretted on the 7th fret. This allows you to make use of the chop technique by not having any open strings that could potentially ring out. This chord shape is a bit of a stretch for a lot of people, but remember to stay relaxed and work on it every day and pretty soon you will wonder why it seemed so hard only a short time ago.

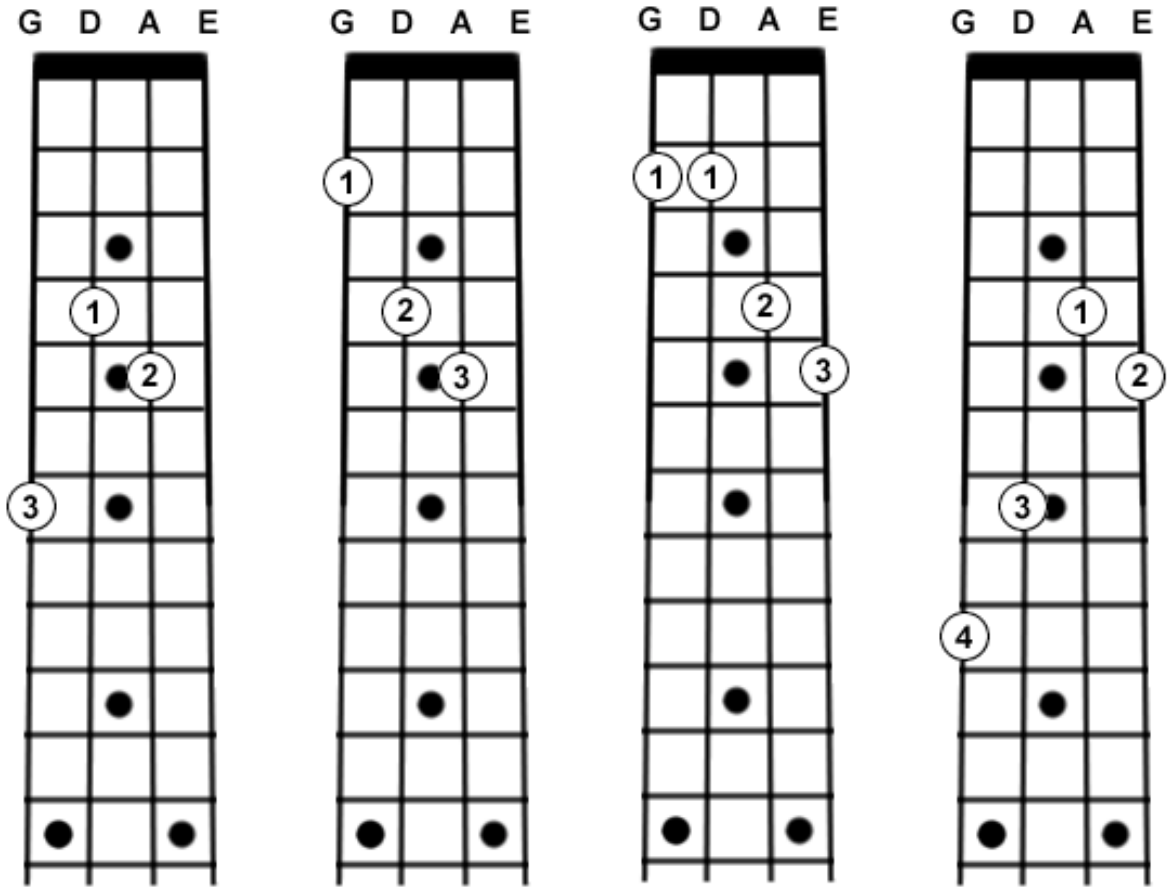


G Chord **G Chop Chord** **C Chord** **C Chop Chord**

The same principle holds for the C Chop chord. Starting with the C chord we already know, we add our 3rd finger on the fifth fret of the G string and make sure not to play the open E string, and voila, C Chop.

The reason you cant play any open strings for chop chords is because to create the chop sound you must mute the strings with the tips of your fingers by releasing pressure from the strings (without taking your fingers off the strings) only moments after playing the chord. Practice this by letting the chord ring out and after a second or so, release the pressure from your left hand without taking your fingers entirely off the strings. This mutes the strings and thereby stops the notes from sounding. Slowly reduce the amount of time that you allow the strings to ring before muting them until you create the fast, percussive "chop" sound that you are looking for.

Now lets take a look at some other chop chord shapes:



D Chop **Alternate D Chop** **A Chop** **Alternate A Chop**

The first D chop chord shown above is the exact same shape as the C chop chord moved up two frets. In other words, you shift your left hand towards the bridge and body of the mandolin by two frets and now, instead of a C chop chord you have a D chop chord.

The second, alternate D chop chord has the same notes fretted for the middle pairs of strings (4th and 5th frets), but instead of fretting them with your first and second fingers, they are now fretted with your 2nd and 3rd fingers. Your first finger then frets the second fret of the D string rather than the 3rd finger fretting the 7th fret. Like the C chop chord, the E string is not played.

The first A chop chord, like the first D chop chord, is the same shape as the G chop chord moved up by two frets. The second, alternate A chop chord functions in the same manner as the alternate D chop chord.

One great thing about chop chords is that once you know the two different patterns I've shown above, you can play any chord you want simply by shifting your left hand up or down the frets. For example, Move either D chop chord up one fret and you get E flat (or D sharp). Move either D chop down one fret from the original position and you get C sharp (or D flat). With the A chop chords, the same rules apply. Moving either chord up one fret results in a B flat (A sharp) chord, and moving it down one fret results in an A flat (G sharp) chord.

If you want to get really adventurous, move the A chord up 3 frets and you get a high C chop chord.

With any of these chop chords, the other chords you would use are in the same place as they were with the open chords. If you are in the key of C, instead of using the open C, F, and G chords, use the high C chop chord i just mentioned. From that position, try using the alternate D chop chord up 3 frets to achieve an F chop chord. Move that shape up two more frets and you have G chop chord.

Using these shapes, experiment and find a couple different ways to play the same chord progressions using different chord shapes. As you get more comfortable with the shapes, you will be able to pick and choose what ways to play your chords to vary up the sound of your music as a solo artist or within the setting of a band.