

# How to Play Ping Pong (Table Tennis)

Table tennis, also known as *ping-pong*, is an exciting game that can be played by two or four players. Even recreational players can relatively quickly become highly skilled and ping pong at the professional level is truly a sight to behold. This article presents the basic rules of ping-pong along with tips for how to win.

**Find someone to play with.** You probably want to begin by playing someone who is at about your skill level or a little better, and preferably someone who isn't aggressively competitive. This way, you can have fun learning how to play. You can play one-on-one, or you can play with two teams of two, which is known as doubles.

**Decide who serves first.** According to the official International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) rules, the right to choose whether to serve first is determined "by lot" (i.e. flipping a coin or drawing straws, etc.), with the winner choosing either to serve first or which side he or she wants. If the winner chooses whether to serve or to receive, the opposing player or team gets to choose which side of the table they will play on, and vice versa. In most recreational ping-pong games, however, the serve is determined by a quick rally, typically with each player spelling out one letter of the word P-I-N-G for each hit they make. After the word P-I-N-G is spelled out, the person to win the rally serves first or chooses which side of the table they wish to play on.

**Serve the ball.** The ball should be tossed out of your open free hand vertically, a minimum of 16cm (6 inches), and then hit with the paddle so that it first hits your side of the table once and then goes over the net and hits your opponent's side. If playing singles, the server can serve to any point on the opponent's side of the table, and the opponent should then return it. If playing doubles, the serve is rotated between you and your partner, starting with the person on the right, and the ball must bounce first in the right half of your side of the table and then must be delivered cross-court to your opponent's right side. After two points have been awarded, your opponent or, in doubles, the person on the opposing team who is cross-court from the server, then gets to serve. After two more points are awarded, the original server's or, in doubles, his partner, then serves. In other words, the serve switches sides every two points. If the ball hits the net on an otherwise a legal serve, the serve is a "let," and the serve is repeated with no points scored. After 2 consecutive lets the player opposite of the server receives the point. On game point the person that is losing shall be the server.

**Return the ball.** After a serve or return, the ball may be returned over or around the net to any point on the opponent's side of the table. The ball must be returned after it bounces once on your side, but before it bounces twice or hits the floor or any object off the table. If the ball hits the net on a return, but proceeds to go over the net and hit your opponent's side, the ball is still in play, and your opponent must return it.

**Score points.** A point is awarded for each rally that is not a let, and either opponent can score a point regardless of who served.

- If your serve goes into the net, goes off the table without hitting the opponent's side, or (in doubles) hits the wrong half of the opponent's side, the receiving opponent or team scores a point.
- If you do not make a legal return (as described above: i.e. the ball goes into the net or doesn't hit your opponent's side of the table) a point is awarded to your opponent.
- If you receive a legal serve or return and hit the ball more than once with your paddle or touch the ball with your body, a point is awarded to your opponent. Note that if your opponent's serve or return doesn't hit your side of the table, you still get the point even if the ball hits you or you catch it after it passes the end of the table.
- If you touch the table with your free hand or move the table, your opponent scores a point.

**Win the game.** Many people like to play to 21 or 15 (alternating server every 5 points), which is fine for recreational play. The official rules, however, state play is to 11 points (alternating server every 2 points). In order to win, one must be ahead by two points. If the players or teams are tied at 10-10 or 20-20, for example, the normal order of service proceeds, but the serve alternates sides after every points instead of after every two points.

**Play again.** In sanctioned competition, matches are won by the player or team who wins two out of three games. The players switch sides after each game, and they also switch sides in the third game (if a third game is necessary) when one player or team scores five points. The team or player serving first also changes each game.

**Practice consistently.** You can become a pretty good ping-pong player quickly with consistent practice. The most important things to practice initially are keeping your eye on the ball, getting a feel for the correct timing, and keeping the ball low.

- From the very first time you pick up a paddle, you should consciously make an effort to follow the ball with your eyes, from the moment it is served to when it hits your paddle, and so on.
- Your timing will become better with practice--you just need to get used to it--but it helps if you

listen to the ball as well as watch it closely.

- Keeping the ball low--without hitting it into the net--is probably the hardest skill for beginners to master. It's also one of the most essential, because a high ball can easily be smashed down by your opponent. Try to keep your paddle as horizontal as possible and use your wrist to impart energy to the ball and to aim it. Generally, the faster the ball is moving, the easier it is to keep it low.

**Develop a strong backhand and forehand.** You must be able to hit the ball from either side of your body if you want to become good at table tennis, and it's generally not practical to switch hands, so get comfortable with both your forehand and backhand shots.

**Learn to put spin on the ball.** This is done by flicking the wrist side-to-side or up-and-down right as the ball is hit. To counter-spin, put spin of your own on the ball. If you don't know how to put spin on something, politely ask an experienced player to show you how (it is easier to understand through experience rather than reading how.)

**Smash balls that your opponent hits high.** Smashing (also called slamming or spiking) the ball entails hitting it with force so that it goes fast enough to, hopefully, be unreturnable. A slam is a powerful weapon, but it can be difficult at first to use it accurately, and you may find that your slams initially go into the net or well off the other side of the table. Don't be afraid to keep trying them, though. You'll eventually get it.

**Develop a killer serve.** A fast serve or a serve with plenty of spin on it can become the key to your game as you face better players. If you give your opponent an easy serve, you'll be lucky to get a paddle on his return.

**Outmaneuver your opponent.** As you face better competition you can't just expect your opponent to make mistakes, even if you're hitting the ball hard. You've got to force errors by taking control of the game and making your opponent move around the table a lot. If you can hit one shot off the right side and then quickly hit another shot to the left side you might be able to prevent your opponent from getting the ball. Tricks, such as giving the appearance of a slam and then dinking the ball, or getting into a right-left pattern and then hitting two or three consecutive shots to the right, can also put your opponent off-balance and in position for a slam.

## TIPS

- There are two commonly-used styles of gripping the paddle: the pen grip (penhold) and the shakehand grip. With the pen grip, you essentially hold your paddle just as you would hold a pen, and with the shakehand grip you place your hand on the paddle's handle as though you are shaking hands with it, and then wrap your fingers loosely around it. Regardless of how you grip the paddle, it's important to hold it loosely to allow your wrist to move freely. If your fist is clenched around the handle, most of your force for returns will come from your arm, not your wrist, and you won't be as accurate.
- Professional players generally stand a little farther back from the table, and as you begin to get into faster rallies, you may find this is a good technique as well.
- When hitting hard, hit it so the path of the ball travel in a diagonal. This will result in more distance, but enough force is still there to make a decent hit,
- Some recreational players alter the rules so that the serve must travel off the end of the table (as opposed to the side) in order to be legal. Another common "basement rule" is that if your serve bounces twice on your opponent's side of the table, your opponent scores the point. These rule changes can be useful to make the serve less of a factor in the game so that you can get more practice rallying.
- Practice on the mirror, sway your hand.
- There are a wide variety of ping-pong paddles available, and while the cheap ones at your local sporting discount store are just fine for beginners, as you get more advanced you may want to get your own custom paddle.
- Putting the table against a wall can help you play by yourself. The wall will return the ball (hopefully a concrete one), giving you a bit more strength in your throw.
- As much as possible, avoid playing this game in an outdoor setting where wind can off-track your ball. This may a bit annoying as the ball may not land on a spot where you have expected it. You may choose to play inside a gym or a large room where no wind can ruin the game.
- Did you know that sportsmanship is also required in this game? Don't forget to smile on your opponent, and say 'sorry' whenever you got the ball outside or you served it too far. Yep, it counts. Just sharing.
- Practice hitting it off the table. It will freak out the opponents