

# Rules of the Game

## Unarmed Attacks (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Most **D&D** characters have a vast array of weaponry available to them. Lethal implements such as swords, maces, and spears are seldom out of reach, and many characters also wield deadly spells. Still, a simple kick, head butt, or punch has its place in the game, too, especially when dealing with the unexpected.



The rules for attacking without weapons contain a few odd twists that can throw off players and DMs who don't use them often, and characters who make **unarmed attacks** into an art, such as monks, can pose some special problems as well. This series explores unarmed attacks in detail, and seeks to throw some light into the territory's murkier corners.

### The Language of Unarmed Attacks

Here are a few terms you'll encounter in this article.

**Free Hand:** For a humanoid or other bipedal character, a hand that's not occupied with holding or wielding a weapon or other object, or being used for some other purpose, such as clinging to a wall.

**Iterative Attack:** One or more extra attacks a character gains by virtue of a high base attack bonus when using the full attack action; see pages 22 and 143 in the *Player's Handbook*.

**Lethal Damage:** Damage that reduces a creature's hit points.

**Natural Weapon:** An appendage or other body part (such as teeth or claws) that a creature can use to attack other creatures or objects. Natural weaponry deals lethal damage without recourse to a class feature or feat,

such as Improved Unarmed Strike.

**Nonlethal Damage:** Damage that accumulates without reducing a creature's hit points. When a creature accumulates enough nonlethal damage to equal its current hit points, it is staggered. When a creature accumulates enough nonlethal damage to exceed its current hit points, it is unconscious. Some creatures ignore nonlethal damage.

**Threatened Area:** The area around a creature where it can make armed melee attacks. For most creatures, this is the band of squares adjacent to the creature.

Generally, a creature must wield a weapon or have a natural weapon to threaten an area.

**Unarmed Attack/Unarmed Strike:** These two terms are used interchangeably to describe an attack with an appendage that is not a natural weapon, such as a human's fist. An unarmed attack usually deals nonlethal damage and provokes an attack of opportunity from the creature being attacked.

### Unarmed Attack Basics

The unarmed attack entry in Chapter 8 of the *Player's Handbook* contains most of the rules for fighting without weaponry. Here's an overview, along with a few additions and comments:

- You usually make an unarmed attack with a free hand.

As far as the rules are concerned, you can use just about any part of your body in an unarmed attack: a head butt, kick, elbow, knee, or forearm. This means you don't need a free hand to make an unarmed attack.

If you're making any unarmed attacks in addition to an attack with your primary hand (for instance, a sword slash and a kick or head butt), consider the unarmed attacks as off-hand attacks even if you aren't making them with a hand. See Part Two for notes about using unarmed strikes as primary and secondary weapons.

- An unarmed attack provokes an **attack of opportunity**.

The creature you target with your unarmed attack gets an attack of opportunity against you, provided that it is armed (that is, holding a weapon, has a natural weapon, or has the Improved Unarmed Strike feat). Other foes that threaten you don't get attacks of opportunity against you.

Technically, the creature you attack gets an attack of opportunity against you even if you're not in the area it threatens (or when it's too small to threaten the area around it) because you're reaching into its space to make your unarmed attack. For example, if you're size **Medium** and you use your 5-foot **reach** to make an unarmed attack against a **Tiny** creature (reach 0 feet) that has a weapon (natural or otherwise), you provoke an attack of opportunity. If you've ever tried to pick up an angry cat, you'll have no difficulty appreciating what the rules are trying to simulate here.

The attack of opportunity you provoke is resolved before your unarmed attack. If the attack of opportunity kills or

### From page 301 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

**Staggered:** A character whose nonlethal damage exactly equals his current hit points is staggered. A staggered character may take a single move action or standard action each round (but not both, nor can she take full-round actions).

A character whose current hit points exceed his nonlethal damage is no longer staggered; a character whose nonlethal damage exceeds his hit points becomes unconscious.

**Unconscious:** Knocked out and helpless. Unconsciousness can result from having current hit points between -1 and -9, or from nonlethal damage in excess of current hit points.

knocks you out, your unarmed attack is spoiled.

- If your base attack bonus is high enough to give you iterative attacks, you can make multiple unarmed attacks when you use the full attack action.

This makes unarmed attacks fairly odd. Natural weaponry does not allow iterative attacks, but unarmed attacks -- which you make with part of your body -- do. This arises from the rules' attempt to simulate the sheer mastery some pugilists and martial artists achieve with unarmed strikes.

- When your unarmed attack hits, you deal unarmed strike damage.

For a Medium character, an unarmed strike deals 1d3 points of nonlethal damage, plus your **Strength** modifier. A **Small** character's unarmed strike deals 1d2 points of nonlethal damage. A **Large** character's unarmed strike deals 1d4 points of nonlethal damage.

An unarmed strike threatens a **critical hit** on an attack roll of 20 and deals double damage on a confirmed critical hit.

- You can deal lethal damage with an unarmed strike.

Anyone can deal lethal damage with an unarmed strike by taking a -4 penalty on the **attack roll**. This reflects the difficulty you have hitting the foe where it really hurts. You make the decision to take the penalty before you make the attack roll.

- It's possible to be considered armed when you attack without a weapon.

A creature with one or more natural weapons is always considered armed. That is, it threatens the area around it and does not provoke attacks of opportunity when attacking armed foes.

A creature delivering a spell or other magical effect with touch is considered armed when attempting to touch a subject.

The Improved Unarmed Strike feat allows you to function as though armed when making unarmed attacks.

- For purposes of weapon enhancements, an unarmed strike is considered a natural weapon.

If you attack without a weapon, a spell such as *magic weapon* won't help you, but a spell such as *magic fang* will. Unarmed strikes (even improved unarmed strikes) and natural weapons aren't equivalent, however, as we shall see in Part Two.

## What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll consider the Improved Unarmed Strike feat and the monk class.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of

**Dragon Magazine** for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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# Rules of the Game

## Unarmed Attacks (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we considered the basic rules for attacking without weapons. The basics usually prove sufficient when dealing with the occasional unarmed attack from a character who is caught without a weapon. When a character routinely attacks without weapons, things can become more complex.



### The Improved Unarmed Strike Feat

As noted in Part One, the Improved Unarmed Strike feat allows you to make **unarmed attacks** as though you are armed. That is, you don't provoke an **attack of opportunity** when making an unarmed attack and you threaten the area around you.

In addition, your **unarmed strikes** deal **lethal damage** or **nonlethal damage** at your option. If you choose to deal lethal damage with your unarmed strike, you don't take a **penalty** on your **attack roll**.

### Unarmed Strikes and Natural Weaponry

Before we move on, it's worth pointing out that a character making an unarmed attack, even with the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, does not have **natural weapons**. Nor is a natural weapon a substitute for the Improved Unarmed Strike feat.

As we saw in Part One, unarmed strikes allow iterative attacks and natural weapons do not.

A feat that requires natural weaponry as a prerequisite, such as Multiattack, doesn't work with unarmed strikes. Likewise, having a natural weapon is not a substitute for the Improved Unarmed Strike feat. For example, you don't meet the Improved Unarmed Strike prerequisite for the Deflect Arrows feat if you just have a natural weapon.

Remember, however, that magic weapon enhancements that work with natural weaponry, such as the *magic*

*fangspell*, also work with unarmed attacks. This rule allows pugilists and martial artists access to some magic weapon enhancements (also see the next section). It also reflects the fact that a creature making an unarmed strike is using part of its body in the attack.

### Monk Unarmed Strike Class Feature

The **monk** class offers a potent subcategory of unarmed attack. The class provides Improved Unarmed Strike as a bonus feat, but the monk class offers some additional benefits for when fighting without weapons:

- A monk's unarmed strikes can be treated as either manufactured or natural weapons when applying spells or effects that enhance either manufactured or natural weapons. For example, either a *magic weapon* spell or a *magic fang* spell can enhance a monk's unarmed attacks.

This allows a monk access to all manner of weapon enhancements for her unarmed strikes. For example, a monk can use the Improved Natural Attack feat to increase her unarmed strike damage.

- A monk can make unarmed strikes with either hand interchangeably or with a knee, elbow, or foot.

A monk does not suffer an off-hand penalty when attacking unarmed. That is, the monk does not take any attack penalty and gains her full **Strength** bonus to damage (if any) no matter which appendage the monk uses to make the unarmed attack.

This rule doesn't exempt monks from two-weapon combat penalties (see below).

- A monk's unarmed strike damage increases with levels in the class.

A monk uses the unarmed strike damage entry for her monk level on Table 3-10 in the *Player's Handbook* (or on Table 3-11 for a Small or Large monk) instead of the normal unarmed strike damage for the character's size (see Part One).

A monk's unarmed strike threatens a **critical hit** on an attack roll of 20 and deals double damage on a confirmed critical hit.

- An unarmored monk can use a flurry of blows.

When unarmored (that is, when not wearing a suit of armor or using a shield), a monk using the full attack action can make one extra attack when attacking without a weapon or when using a special monk weapon.

Depending on the monk's class level, the extra attack might or might not impose an attack penalty (see the monk class description). If there is a penalty, it applies to all attacks the monk makes (such as attacks of opportunity) until the monk's next turn begins.

A monk cannot use a flurry when using anything other than an unarmed strike or a special monk weapon. A nonmonk weapon or a natural weapon can't be combined with a flurry in any way.

### Unarmed Strikes and Manufactured Weapons

From time to time, characters might find it useful to throw in an unarmed attack along with an attack from a manufactured



weapon, such as a sword. Doing so requires the full attack action.

If the character in question isn't a monk, the rules governing attacks with two weapons cover this situation well. Most often, the character will use the unarmed attack as the off-hand weapon. The character makes one extra attack with the off-hand unarmed attack and gets the benefit of a light off-hand weapon; see the excerpt presented on this page for more details concerning two-weapon fighting. If the character does not have the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, the unarmed off-hand attack provokes an attack of opportunity from the foe the character attacks. The attacker gains only half his Strength bonus to damage for the off-hand attack.

Monks fighting with both manufactured weapons and unarmed attacks are a special case; see Part Three for details.

### Unarmed Strikes and Natural Weapons

Just as a creature can add weapon attacks to a full attack made with natural weapons, so too can it combine unarmed attacks with natural weapons. Two options are available to accomplish this task.

A creature can choose to treat its unarmed attacks as its primary attacks and its natural weapons as secondary attacks. (This method is normally used to add weapon attacks to a natural attack routine.) The creature must make all unarmed attacks with its primary limb, which prevents that hand from being used for a natural attack such as a claw or slam. It uses its full **base attack bonus** for the natural attack, gaining additional attacks as normal for a high base attack bonus, and adds its full Strength bonus on **damage rolls**. Of course, each of these attacks provokes an attack of opportunity if the target is unarmed (unless the creature has Improved Unarmed Strike). However, its natural weapons all become secondary attacks, taking the -5 penalty on attack rolls (or -2 with the Multiattack feat) and adding only half the monster's Strength bonus on damage rolls.

A simpler method is to treat the creature's unarmed attack as an off-hand attack. (After all, an unarmed strike is rarely as effective as a weapon attack would be, so it doesn't really merit the same level of priority in the average monster's attack array.) Instead of using its primary limb to deliver the unarmed attack, it uses a kick, head butt, or other appendage that isn't otherwise used to deliver a natural attack. The creature gains one unarmed strike, which deals damage appropriate to its size plus half its Strength bonus (since it's an off-hand attack). A creature using this method suffers a -4 penalty on all attacks (since it's effectively fighting with two weapons and its off-hand weapon is light). The damage for its natural attacks is unchanged. This method requires fewer calculations on the fly, so it's probably easier to use in play.

Let's look at the nalfeshnee for an example of how each of these methods would work in play.

A nalfeshnee using the first method would have three unarmed attacks (thanks to its base attack bonus of +14).

**From page 160 of the *Player's Handbook*:**

### TWO-WEAPON FIGHTING

If you wield a second weapon in your off hand, you can get one extra attack per round with that weapon. Fighting in this way is very hard, however, and you suffer a -6 penalty with your regular attack or attacks with your primary hand and a -10 penalty to the attack with your off hand. You can reduce these penalties in two ways:

- If your off-hand weapon is light, the penalties are reduced by 2 each. (An unarmed strike is always considered light.)
- The Two-Weapon Fighting feat lessens the primary hand penalty by 2, and the off-hand penalty by 6.

Table 8-10: Two-Weapon Fighting Penalties summarizes the interaction of all these factors.

**Table 8-10: Two-Weapon Fighting Penalties**

Circumstances	Primary Hand	Off Hand
Normal penalties	-6	-10
Off-hand weapon is light	-4	-8
Two-Weapon Fighting feat	-4	-4
Off-hand weapon is light and Two-Weapon Fighting feat	-2	-2

Applying its size modifier, and Strength modifier, the nalfeshnee's total attack modifiers for its three natural attacks are +19, +14, and +9. These natural attacks each deal 1d6+7 points of nonlethal damage. Each of the nalfeshnee's natural weapons takes a -2 penalty for a secondary natural weapon (thanks to the nalfeshnee's Multiattack feat) and gains only half the nalfeshnee's Strength modifier to damage, which gives it two secondary attacks, as follows: one bite +18 (2d8+3) and one claw +17 (1d8+3); it loses one claw attack in order to make unarmed attacks with its primary limb.

Using the second method, the nalfeshnee's natural attacks are made at a -4 penalty (bite +16, 2 claws +13) but deal normal damage. It then makes one unarmed attack at +15 (+14 for base attack bonus, -2 for size, +7 for Strength, -4 for off-hand light weapon) that deals 1d6+3 points of nonlethal damage.

### **What's Next?**

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll look at a few special situations that arise when monks combine weapon attacks with unarmed attacks and other odds and ends regarding unarmed attacks.

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### **About the Author**

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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# Rules of the Game

## Unarmed Attacks (Part Three)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we considered the monk's **unarmed strike** class feature and also looked into what ensues when creatures combine **unarmed attacks** with attacks from manufactured or natural weaponry.



This week, we'll delve into a few more issues arising from **monks'** unarmed attacks and we'll conclude our look into unarmed attacks with a few notes about using unarmed attacks with some selected class features and special attack actions.

### Monks and Natural Weapons

As we saw in Part Two, a creature with **natural weapons** can use them for secondary attacks when using the full attack action. A monk character with natural weaponry has the same option.

For example, an 8th-level lizardfolk monk with a **Strength** score of 17 has a **base attack bonus** of +7 (+1 for its 2 humanoid **Hit Dice** and +6 for its monk levels). The character has three natural weapons: two claws (1d4) and one bite (1d4). For this example, we'll assume the character also has the Multiattack feat.

With the full attack action, our example monk can make two unarmed attacks thanks to its +7 base attack bonus. After adding in the +3 bonus from the monk's Strength score of 17, our example character's unarmed attacks have the following attack bonuses: +10/+5. Thanks to the monk's class level and Strength score, damage for the unarmed strikes is 1d10+3.

The example monk also can attack with its claws and bite as secondary natural attacks at a -2 **penalty** (thanks to the character's Multiattack feat). Each natural weapon uses the character's +7 base attack bonus and +3 Strength modifier, except that the Strength bonus on damage is halved because these are secondary attacks: 2 claws +8 (1d4+1) and bite +8 (1d4+1).

As noted last week, there are no two-weapon or off-hand penalties for these attacks.

The example monk cannot use a flurry of blows because a flurry doesn't work with natural weaponry.

### Monks and Manufactured Weapons

The most painless way for a monk to combine attacks with manufactured weapons and unarmed attacks is to

use special monk weapons (kama, nunchaku, quarterstaff, sai, shuriken, or siangham). You can use any of these interchangeably with the monk's unarmed strikes -- even with a flurry of blows. You can even interchange ranged attacks with shuriken with melee attacks with unarmed attacks or special monk weapons as part of a flurry.

A monk using one or two special monk weapons simply substitutes one attack from each weapon (or from one or both ends of a quarterstaff) as part of a full attack (including a flurry of blows). The monk need not take any penalties for off-hand or two-weapon attacks. The monk, however, does not get an extra attack from a second weapon. If the monk is using a flurry of blows, she adds her full Strength bonus to damage from any successful attack, even if she uses what normally would be her off hand, or uses one end of a quarterstaff as a two-handed weapon.

If a monk is not using her flurry of blows ability, she can claim an extra attack from a second weapon. If she does, she takes all the penalties for attacking with two weapons and for attacking with off-hand weapons. A monk using an unarmed strike as an off-hand attack does not suffer any off-hand penalties; however, under the regular rules for two-weapon fighting you get only one extra attack for an off-hand weapon.

For example a 7th-level monk with a Strength score of 15 that uses a longspear as a primary weapon and makes an off-hand unarmed attack has attack bonuses that are +3 longspear, +7 unarmed. This breaks down as follows: The longspear is +5 base, +2 Strength, -4 two-weapon (off-hand weapon is light). The unarmed strike is +5 base, +2 Strength -- off-hand penalties don't apply to a monk's unarmed strike. Because a longspear is a two-handed weapon, damage from the weapon is 1d8+3. Damage for the unarmed strike is 1d8+2 -- a monk gets her full Strength bonus for unarmed strikes, even when used as off-hand attacks.

Though it might seem odd to use a two-handed weapon such as a longspear as an off-hand weapon, there's no reason you could not treat it as one, though it isn't a very good idea. If the character in this example uses her unarmed strike as her primary weapon and her longspear as the off-hand weapon, she takes a -6 two-weapon penalty for her unarmed strike (the standard penalty for the primary weapon when the off-hand weapon is not light). The monk also takes a -10 on her longspear attack (the standard penalty when the off-hand weapon is not light).

Neither option explored here is as good as a flurry of blows, but a longspear is a reach weapon. Of course, to make attacks with both a longspear and an unarmed strike, our example monk would have to face enemies at varying distances.

The process described here applies to any sort of weapon. For example, if a monk wears a spiked gauntlet, her unarmed attacks aren't enhanced in any way, but she could use the spiked gauntlet in a two-weapon attack.

### **Special Unarmed Attacks**

You can perform any special attack that you can make with a bludgeoning melee weapon with an unarmed attack. Treat an unarmed strike as a light weapon. For example, you can try to sunder a foe's weapon with an unarmed attack, but you take a -4 penalty on the required opposed roll because you're using a light weapon.

### **Unarmed Sneak Attacks**

You can use an unarmed attack as a sneak attack if you meet all

#### **From page 153 of the *Player's Handbook*:**

#### **FLANKING**

When making a melee attack, you get a +2 flanking bonus if your opponent is threatened by a character or creature friendly to you on the opponent's opposite border or opposite corner.

When in doubt about whether two friendly characters flank an opponent in the middle, trace an imaginary line between the two friendly characters' centers. If the line passes through opposite borders of the opponent's space (including corners of those borders), then the opponent is flanked.

the requirements for sneak attacks. That is, your unarmed strike can be a sneak attack if your target is denied its **Dexterity** bonus against your attack or if you **flank** your foe.

Remember that you flank a foe when you make a melee attack and an ally threatens the same foe from the opposite side or corner of the foe's space. You still get the flanking bonus (and the ability to make a sneak attack) even if you don't threaten the foe's space because you're unarmed.

When the unarmed strike you use in a sneak attack deals **nonlethal damage**, all the damage from the sneak attack also is nonlethal -- even the bonus damage from the sneak attack.

If you don't have the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, you can deal normal damage with your unarmed strike by taking a -4 penalty on the **attack roll**. If you do so, you still can make an unarmed sneak attack. This might seem odd, because if you choose to deal nonlethal damage with a weapon that normally deals **lethal damage** (by taking a -4 penalty on the attack roll), you can't also make a sneak attack. However, using a normally lethal weapon represents using that weapon in a less than optimal manner, and that's what spoils your sneak attack. When you take a -4 attack penalty to deal lethal damage with an unarmed strike, you're really making super optimal use of the sneak attack -- the attack penalty merely represents the extra difficulty that act entails.

## Unarmed Attacks and Touch Spells

As Rules of the Game has noted before, you can use an unarmed attack to deliver a **spell** with **touch** range. You make the unarmed attack as you would normally. Your unarmed attack does not provoke an attack of opportunity because you're delivering a touch spell. If your attack roll is high enough to hit your target's regular **Armor Class** (not just its touch Armor Class), you deal unarmed strike damage and you also deliver the spell. If your attack roll fails to hit your target's regular Armor Class, the attack fails. It deals no damage and you don't deliver the spell either. You are, however, still holding the spell, just as if you failed with a touch attack.

## In Conclusion

That wraps up our look at unarmed attacks. You don't need to be a monk to use unarmed attacks (though it helps). Remember that you're never completely without options when you're without a weapon.

*Exception:* If a flanker takes up more than 1 square, it gets the flanking bonus if any square it occupies counts for flanking.

Only a creature or character that threatens the defender can help an attacker get a flanking bonus.

Creatures with a reach of 0 feet can't flank an opponent.

## From page 176 of the *Player's Handbook*:

**Touch Spells and Holding the Charge:** In most cases, if you don't discharge a touch spell on the round you cast it, you can hold the charge (postpone the discharge of the spell) indefinitely. You can make touch attacks round after round. If you cast another spell, the touch spell dissipates.

Some touch spells, such as *teleport* and *water walk*, allow you to touch multiple targets as part of the spell. You can't hold the charge of such a spell; you must touch all targets of the spell in the same round that you finish casting the spell.

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