

MINOR SEVENTHS

Minor seventh chords can be found on the II, III and VI steps of a major scale:

A musical staff in treble clef showing the C major scale. The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B. Above the staff, the chords Dm7, Em7, and Am7 are indicated above the II, III, and VI degrees respectively. Roman numerals I through VII are placed below the staff. An arrow points to the first note (C) with the label 'C major scale'.

A minor seventh (which can be written as Dm7 for example, or as Dmi7 or as D₇) contains a minor third and a minor seventh interval in relation to the root note (D in this instance).

The perfect (unaltered) fifth can be left out if necessary, but it cannot be altered without changing the chord type. If you were to change the A in a Dm7 chord to an Ab it would then become a D half-diminished, written as D^ø or Dm7-5. This is a different type of chord and is treated differently (see separate tutorial). If the A were sharpened to become a Bb, the Dm7 chord would then become a second inversion of a Bb triad with an added C. If you come across, for instance, a Dm7 add Bb, that is the same chord, but do remember that you can't also have an A in the chord and so it has to be omitted.

Notes that can be added to a minor seventh chord are shown below:

A musical staff in treble clef showing a Dm7 chord (D, F, A, C) and its extensions. The notes are labeled as follows: Dm7, b9 (Eb), 9 (E), 11 (F#), +11 (G#), and 13 (B).

Of these, the E, G and B (which also occur in the key) are safest to add. The Eb can be added but be careful as this chord is not easy to handle. The G# can be used but it needs the E to back it up. The B, which requires a G (or G#) and the E to support it, is a very full chord (7-note) and can sound very rich.

There are three inversions of a minor seventh chord:

A musical staff in treble clef showing the root position and three inversions of a Dm7 chord. The notes are labeled as follows: root position (D, F, A, C), 1st inversion (F, A, C, D), 2nd inversion (A, C, D, F), and 3rd inversion (C, D, F, A).

The major ninth chord (less the root-note) can also be inverted, like so:

Dm⁹

root position
1st inversion
2nd inversion
3rd inversion

minus root-note

The 1st inversion of a Dm9 is not used as much as the other chords because of the semitone at the top. Note where the semitone occurs in the other inversions.

To understand the usual functions of a minor seventh chord, you should see it in relation to the tonic chord. If you can place it in a I VI II V sequence or a III VI II V sequence you know that all of the chords in question are related to the key of C and the related C major scale.

The strongest chord sequences are those which go to a perfect fifth below, ie. D G C F Bb Eb Ab etc. They may not be the most interesting but they have a strong pull. This applies to any chords following chords of the same type.

This brings me to the II V I sequence, which is short for IIm7 V7 I in a major key (Dm7 G7 C in the key of C).

In classical theory, the minor seventh chord here is nothing less than an eleventh chord, the eleventh note of which resolves on to the third of the dominant seventh chord which then resolves on to the tonic. I've changed the key to keep things mostly in the stave.

D¹¹ D⁷ G

3rd omitted owing to
clash with 4th/11th (top G)

It took a long time for the minor seventh chord to become accepted in its own right, even in jazz it is rare to find one before the Swing Era. But then along came Bebop and you couldn't move for all the II V Is and II Vs and the minor seventh chord within those sequences.

Just to recap then, whenever you have a dominant seventh you can have a minor seventh chord before it with its root-note a perfect fifth higher.

The dominant seventh can also be substituted for another dominant seventh built on the note a tritone away (diminished fifth), so Dm7 Db7 C instead of Dm7 G7 C.

However the poor minor seventh does not have to be limited to this treatment. A minor seventh can follow any other minor seventh on any chromatic step. It can also be used as stepping stones in an ascending or descending passage, eg.

Dm7 Em7 F Δ G7 Am7 or in reverse order.

It can also be interspersed with other chords, eg.

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. Four chords are written as vertical lines with wavy stems, indicating they are to be held. Above each chord is its name: Dm⁹, B \flat Δ ⁹, Dm⁹, and B \flat ⁹⁺¹¹. The first chord (Dm⁹) has notes D, F, A, C, E \flat , G. The second chord (B \flat Δ ⁹) has notes B \flat , D, F, A, C, E \flat . The third chord (Dm⁹) has notes D, F, A, C, E \flat , G. The fourth chord (B \flat ⁹⁺¹¹) has notes B \flat , D, F, A, C, E \flat .

The minor seventh chord is very versatile. Treat it with respect.