

How many hearts?

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When an opening bid of a major is made, any raise of that major by responder puts opener firmly in charge of deciding the final contract.

Say the opening bid is 1♥. With four or more hearts, responder should give partner the good news that an eight-card fit exists by raising hearts straightaway. Until you learn more sophisticated methods, raising hearts means bidding 2♥, 3♥ or 4♥.

An opening 1♥ normally shows from 12 to 19 HCP, but when considering which raise to make, responder should assume that opener has a minimum of 12 points. Now it's generally agreed that with about 25 points between the two hands, we should try for game (even if it doesn't make!) so responder should reason:

With 0-5 HCP we can't have 25 HCP, so I should pass 1♥.

With 13 HCP we must have at least 25 HCP, so I should bid 4♥.

I should raise to 2♥ or 3♥ on 6-12 HCP so, splitting the range, bid 2♥ with 6-9 HCP and 3♥ with 10-12.

♠ 7	♠ K J 9 5
♥ A K 10 6 4	♥ J 7 5 3
♦ J 9 8 6	♦ J 3
♣ K J 5	♣ 9 7 3

East should not even think of bidding 1♠; there is no point in looking for another 4-4 fit in a major when we have already found one. So the bidding should go:
1♥ 2♥ and West passes with a minimum opening.

♠ 7	♠ K J 9 5
♥ A K 10 6 4	♥ K 7 5 3
♦ J 9 8 6	♦ K 3
♣ K J 5	♣ 9 7 3

With three kings rather than three jacks, East has 10HCP so the bidding should go:
1♥ 3♥ and West with a minimum should pass.

♠ 7	♠ K J 9 5
♥ A K 10 6 4	♥ K 7 5 3
♦ J 9 8 6	♦ K 3
♣ K J 5	♣ A 9 3

1♥ 4♥
With ♣A making 14HCP East goes straight to game

Now counting points and deciding how far to raise works fine if both hands are fairly flat, but the other day Marion picked up this hand, when I was standing nearby.

♠ J 9 4 3
♥ K J 7 5 3 2
♦ K 5
♣ 3

Janice opened 1♥ and Marion bid 4♥. She said 'Oh Sandra, it may be only 8 points but it's far too good for 2♥'. And she was quite right! Playing in a trump suit, shortages stop opponents cashing their high card winners just as well as aces and kings.

There is another method for deciding how far to raise partner's major – called the Losing Trick Count. It works on the principle that no hand can have more than twelve losers and no suit can have more than three losers. Here is what you do:

LOSING TRICK COUNT

1 Count the losers in each suit

Count each suit of three or more cards as three losers. Deduct one loser for each of the ace, king or queen that you hold.

With two cards count two losers. Deduct one for the ace or king.

With one card count one loser, unless it is the ace.

With a void there are no losers.

2 Find your loser total. Add the losers in each suit together.

3 Use the total to work out how far to raise.

With 9 or 10 losers, make a single raise e.g. to 2♥.

With 8 losers, double raise e.g. to 3♥.

With 7 or fewer losers, raise to game e.g. 4♥.

With an even better hand, we might consider looking for a slam, but not yet!

♠ K J 9 5
♥ J 7 5 3
♦ J 3
♣ 9 7 3

Let's check this way of deciding how far to raise. This hand has two losers in spades, three in hearts, two in diamonds and three in clubs. Ten losers in total means a raise to 2♥.

♠ K J 9 5
♥ K 7 5 3
♦ K 3
♣ 9 7 3

This hand has two spade, two heart, one diamond and three club losers, giving an eight-loser total. That makes it worth a 3♥ raise.

♠ K J 9 5
♥ K 7 5 3
♦ K 3
♣ A 9 3

This hand has two spade, two heart, one diamond and two club losers. That's a total of seven losers, making the hand worth a raise to 4♥.

♠ J 9 4 3
♥ K J 7 5 3 2
♦ K 5
♣ 3

Look at Marion's hand. She has three losers in spades, two in hearts, one in diamonds and one in clubs. The total of seven losers means Marion was quite right to bid 4♥.

Opener can count losers too, when deciding whether to bid on when their suit has been raised. A minimum 1♥ opener normally has seven losers, look at that original hand at the top of the page and count its losers. An opener with two extra tricks, that is five or fewer losers, will often want to bid game.

But a word of caution. Both ♣Q32 and ♣A32 are two loser suits, but clearly ♣A is certain winner, where the ♣Q is not – so look at your point count as well as your losers. And whilst jacks don't count in the Losing Trick Count, ♣QJ10 is a much better holding than ♣Q32, so learn to value a hand by its point count and overall strength as well as its loser trick count.

Three pairs of students were given a few hands to practice raising opener's major. Which pair do you think bid the hands best?

♠ K Q J 7	♠ A 9 5 3 2
♥ A J 4	♥ 10 9 5 3
♦ K Q 8 6	♦ 3
♣ 4 3	♣ A 7 5

Jim opened 1♠ and tried 3♠ when Janet bid 2♠. Janet went 4♠, which made ten tricks. Fizz opened 1♠, Trixie bid 3♠ and Fizz went 4♠, whilst Robert bid 1♠ and Eddie raised to 4♠.

I think that Trixie did best with her raise to 3♠ on this eight loser hand.

♠ K 9 8 7 4	♠ Q J 5 3
♥ A	♥ Q 6 5 3
♦ K Q J 10 6	♦ 3 2
♣ 4 3	♣ Q 7 5

Jim opened 1♠ and Janet bid 2♠. Jim passed
Fizz opened 1♠, Trixie bid 2♠ and Fizz went 3♠.
Robert bid 1♠ and Eddie raised to 3♠, Robert bid 4♠.

Nine tricks were made at each table, so 2♠ was the best contract this time. East has an eight loser hand in theory, but when all the suits are headed by queens, it's not that strong and 2♠ is the best response. 4♠ was ambitious over 2♠, but give East ♣A rather than ♣Q (still an eight loser hand) and it would probably have made.

♠ J 7 4 2	♠ –
♥ A Q 8 6 2	♥ K J 7 5 3
♦ A 3	♦ 10 9 8 7 6 5
♣ A 5	♣ 3 2

Jim opened 1♥ and Janet bid 2♥. Jim passed
Fizz opened 1♥, Trixie bid 3♥ and Fizz passed
Robert bid 1♥ and Eddie just bid 4♥.

East may have only four points, but with no spade, two heart, three diamond and two club losers, it is a seven-loser hand and you should raise 1♥ straight to 4♥! Not only can you hope that 4♥ will make, you also make it very hard for opponents to enter the auction. North/South can make ten tricks in spades and they never bid! Well done Eddie for the immediate raise to 4♥.