

THE ARCANA

CHECK

DEATH'S DOOR

DEATH RULES FOR D&D 5E



*Everyone is
three steps away
from Death's Door.
Whether that door
is open or closed
depends on
them...*



DEATH'S DOOR

DEATH RULES FOR D&D 5E

Written by Bartholomew Klick

Edited by Lynn Caldwell

Illustrated by Zachary Stoppel

The D&D 5e Dungeon Master's Guide offers rules changes to help create a grim-dark setting, but in many cases, these changes, in my experience, frustrate players and simply discourage them from picking certain classes, even when they were in the mood for a riskier setting with a darker tone.

This edition of the *Arcana Check* looks to the pulse-pounding indie title *Darkest Dungeon* for inspiration. In Red Hook's grimdark phantasmagoria of horror, magic, and adrenaline, heroes are as expendable as torches, and battle to keep their light from being snuffed away up until their last gasp.

The mechanic for death works like this: a hero falls to 0 hit points, takes a significant debuff, but is otherwise okay. They're not

unconscious, and they can move as much as they want and take any action they normally could. But the next damage they take – even the next time they're startled – is a save versus death. This time spent at 0 hit points – a status called Death's Door – completely changes the dynamic of the game. With even one hit point, risky choices are the norm. But at death's door, the fragility of the hero forces the player to decide, all on their own, between changing tactics to try to save the hero, committing to the plan that brought them here, or even to retreating entirely. One of the results of this system is a reinforcement of the grim overtones in the depths of the *Darkest Dungeon*.

We're going to look at a death system in this document that fuses *Darkest Dungeon*'s Spartan rules on death to the rules we're already familiar with,

preserving the race against time created by the traditional system of death saving throws, but also preserve the player's autonomy right up to the moment their character passes through Death's Door.

DEATH'S DOOR

Everyone is three steps away from Death's Door. If they find The Door is Open, they step through and die. If it is Closed, they remain alive.

When you fall to 0 hit points, you do not fall unconscious or prone. Rather, you are at Death's Door.

Falling to Death's Door imposes a point of exhaustion.

At the start of a turn, if you are at Death's Door, you Step Closer to The Door. Do so by rolling a d20 with no modifiers. Keep track of your result. If, after three steps, you have rolled at least a total of 30, Death's Door is closed to you. If you roll below this, The Door is Open and you perish.

Whenever you close Death's Door, you are stabilized, but do not regain a hit point. You can do anything you want while not having hit points, but the world becomes deadly, and the next hit can kill you, as described in "Being Attacked at Zero Hit Points."

Additionally, the number of points you need to Close the Door increases by 5 points. This resets to its normal value at the end of a long rest.

STABILIZING A CREATURE

Stabalizing a creature closes Death's Door for them. This can be done with a medicine check. Each point of a medicine check adds 1 to the total number of points

needed to Close the Door.

The DM may create certain situations where a character is at Death's Door for a reason other than being at zero hit-points: for instance, turning to stone because of a Medusa's gaze, or rotting away from a curse. In these situations, the DM may rule that characters can attempt to pull a creature from Death's Door with Arcana or Religion checks, to stop the progression of a hex, curse, or similar condition. In order to do so, they must be proficient in those skills and also have access to spell slots, one of which must be expended to make the check.

Add any result of a check to stabilize a creature to that creature's total needed to close Death's Door. Remember that 1s on skill checks are not critical failures; these will still add one point plus any relevant modifiers. If their total number of points rises above 30, they are pulled from Death's Door.

It should be relatively easy to come back from Death's Door with the help of your friends, provided you're not bouncing off of the condition repeatedly, and provided you do not hit six points of exhaustion (which is fatal.)

Natural 20

A natural 20 closes Death's Door for the character and removes the point of exhaustion inflicted on the character for falling to death's door.

The character will still need to regain hit points or else remain vulnerable to being killed outright by creatures, as detailed under the section "Being Attacked at Zero Hit Points."

Cantrips

The 'Spare the Dying' cantrip closes Death's Door, but does not add hit points to a creature.

Thaumaturgy cannot be used to "Slam Death's Door," nor can Arcane Lock be used on Death's Door to create a pseudo-lich. Shout-outs to Angela & Mik for being hilarious.

Healer's Kit

A charge from a healer's kit allows any check to pull someone from Death's Door to be worth double its normal value for the purpose of closing Death's Door. A DM might rule that a specific Healer's Kit only works with medicine, arcana, or religion checks, but they may also rule that such kits are universally useful for magical & mundane medicine.

A character with the Healer feat can use a charge from the kit to grant a hit point instead, which closes Death's Door.

In both cases, the points needed to close Death's Door in the future still increase by 5. Neither prevent the point of exhaustion.

MAGICAL HEALING

In most situations, magical healing received while at Death's Door immediately closes Death's Door.

Once The Door is Closed, points of magical healing that are remaining spill over into your hit-point total.

BEING ATTACKED AT ZERO HIT POINTS

If a creature strikes you while you have zero hit points, make a Constitution saving throw.

The DC is 10 + the attacker's damage

modifier for the attack.

If you fail the saving throw by more than 5 points and are at Death's Door, you are slain. If you fail the saving throw by more than 5 points, but are not at Death's Door, you fall to Death's Door.

If you fail the saving throw by fewer than 5 points, you survive, but must roll on the injury table.

If you succeed on the saving throw, nothing happens. If you roll a natural 20, nothing happens.

Your hit point total must already be at zero in order to trigger this saving throw. Being reduced to zero hit points puts you at Death's Door, but does not force you to make a Constitution saving throw.

Some attacks and spell attacks do not have damage modifiers, making them inefficient at killing heroes. Massive damage may still kill a hero outright and skip this check.

If creatures make multiple attacks against a character with zero hit points, each attack triggers a this constitution saving throw, but it's at the DM's discretion whether or not to roll damage to check for a death by massive damage (which must all come from the same attack.)

SPECIAL CASES:

Humans, Samurai, Barbarians & The Periapt of Wound Closure

Humans are filled with determination. They need only roll a total of 20 points to close Death's Door. This total can still increase with repeated journeys to Death's Door.

18th level Samurai still do not suffer a point of exhaustion from falling to Death's

Door.

The Periapert of Wound Closure stabilizes a creature at Death's Door at the start of that creature's turn. Its other effect is unchanged.

Path of the Bezerker Barbarians should not be punished for their class choice. Leaving a Frenzy only adds a point of exhaustion if the character has not been at Death's Door in the past ten minutes.

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Temporary hit points are a barrier between your character and death. If you have temporary hit points while at Death's Door, creatures that attack you must deplete those hit points before they can force you to make the saving throw described under *Being Attacked at Zero Hitpoints*. Damage that removes the temporary hit-points does not spill over, though massive damage can still kill you outright.

NON-LETHAL DAMAGE

You cannot be brought to Death's Door by nonlethal damage.

Being brought to 0 HP by non-lethal damage results in falling unconscious for 1d10 minus your Constitution modifier minutes.

MASSIVE DAMAGE

Massive damage can kill you instantly (See *Player's Handbook*, p. 197.). When damage reduces you to 0 Hit Points and there is damage remaining, you die if the remaining damage equals or exceeds your hit point maximum. This is unchanged from normal 5e rules.

By default, damage below 0 hit points is

not cumulative, meaning that a creature cannot "double dip" against a player character by lowering their HP to the massive damage threshold over multiple turns while also forcing them to make the special saving throws defined under *Being Attacked at Zero Hit Points*. In playtesting, having this rule in place made the decision to run versus fight incredibly lop-sided, but if you want to very strongly encourage your players to flee while at Death's Door, consider ignoring this rule against double dipping.

CRITICAL STRIKES

If a critical strike takes you to 0 hit-points, you fall unconscious and prone in addition to being placed at Death's Door.

Suffering a critical strike while at death's door knocks you unconscious and prone.

MONSTERS & NPCs

Monsters, hirelings, and other non-player characters that do not have at least one level in any class die when they hit 0 hit points.

Any creature can be subdued with non-lethal damage by the above rules.

INJURY TABLE

Injuries heal automatically over downtime, as well as over a period of three long rests. The Lesser Restoration spell can heal any of these injuries automatically (it addresses the cause of the statistical loss, rather than the statistical loss directly), or with any magical healing that rolls a dice of its maximum value.

1. *Lose a body part.* Roll on the body part table.
2. *Internal wound.* Lose a point of constitution (and potentially adjust your hit-point maximum.)
3. *Hands or feet.* Lose a point of dexterity.
4. *Arms or legs.* Lose a point of strength.
5. *Head, front.* Lose a point of intelligence.
6. *Eyes.* Suffer -2 to both perception and initiative checks.
7. *Facial scar.* Lose or gain a point of charisma (flip a coin against the DM.)
8. *Not today, Mother Morrigan.* No injury is sustained.

BODY PARTS TABLE

Missing body parts never heal on their own. These dire injuries only heal under the specific manners listed below.

1. *Crushed or removed neck or head.* You are dead. *To recover:* *reincarnate, resurrection.*
2. *Eye.* Disadvantage on perception and initiative checks. If you lose two eyes, you are blind. *To recover:* *regenerate or greater restoration.*
3. *Finger(s).* Disadvantage on sleight of hand checks and checks to not become disarmed. *To recover:* *regenerate.*
4. *Hand or part of arm.* You can only hold one item. You lose both a point of strength and a point of dexterity. Consider getting a hook. *To recover:* *regenerate.*
5. *Foot or part of leg.* You lose 5 feet of movement permanently. You lose both a point of strength and a point of dexterity. Until you become proficient with a prosthetic limb, you have disadvantage on dexterity saving throws. *To recover:* *regenerate.*
6. *Devastating internal injury.* The points needed to close Death's Door permanently increases by 10 points. You lose a point of Constitution. *To recover:* *greater restoration.*

DEATH'S DOOR

VERSION 2.0.0

The Arcana Check uses Semantic Versioning, which has 3 numbers separated by a period. The numbers can be read as: Major.Minor.Patch

Major. A change that alters the entire concept of a document, such as removing or completely changing a feature. First releases begin as 1.0.0.

Minor. A change that adds something about a hack, such as swapping a spell in a spell list, changing the damage of an ability, or adding a new feature.

Patch. A change that addresses typos and exploitable features.

1.0.0 - Sept 2018 - Initial release.

2.0.0 - January 2019 - Reworked the Death's Door concept entirely.

2.0.1 - January 2019 -- Revisions for clarity. Changes made from player feedback.

2.0.2 - January 2019 -- Typos corrected. Legendary creatures no longer unkillable god-monsters.

CREDITS

Art by Zachary Stoppel
Writing & Concept by Bartholomew Klick
Edited by Lynn Caldwell

The Arcana Check is
[Powered by Patreon](#)

Special thanks to:
Angela Slater
Max Killjoy
Ashley Gillespie-Horne
Foradain
Stray
William Davy
Jack Morrison
Martin Dijkstra
Anthony Mahone
Andrew Conger
Nicholas Kwasny
Randy Milam
William Cord
Jim
Reid Nebergall
Austin Cabrera
Get more at

www.yesthievescant.com
www.patreon.com/thievescant