How to choose the right hinges for your project

When it comes to cabinets, a lot hinges on the hinges. Their style and functionality have a huge effect on the overall appearance and performance of your cabinets and doors, maybe as much as the choice of wood or finish. The good news is that a wide range of hinge options are available, so there’s an excellent chance there’s a hinge out there that’s right for your application. But with so many choices, how do you find it?

Probably the best place to start is to figure out what type of cabinets and doors you have because that’s typically how hinges are broadly categorized.

1. Determine cabinet type

There are two basic types of cabinets (with corresponding hinges):

- **Cabinet side**
- **Door**
- **Face frame**
- **Top view**

**Face-frame cabinets** incorporate a frame (often made from 1-1/2" to 2" wide solid wood) that is attached to the front edges, or face, of the case. Hinges mount to this face frame. This is the most common style in American cabinets.

**Frameless cabinets** are essentially a four-sided box, typically made from 3/4" thick stock. Hinges mount to the cabinet interior. Frameless cabinets also are sometimes called Euro-style cabinets.

2. Determine door overlay

This has to do with the position of the door in relation to the cabinet opening. The configurations for frameless and face-frame cabinets are slightly different.

**Overlay types for face-frame cabinets**

- **Overlay** doors do exactly what the name implies: They cover the cabinet opening completely, overlapping the cabinet case or face frame on all sides.

- **Inset** doors, by contrast, fit entirely within the cabinet opening and sit flush with the cabinet sides or face frames when in the closed position.

- **Partial-inset**, 3/8" inset or lipped doors overlap the cabinet opening slightly on all sides, but a 3/8" x 3/8" shoulder machined along all edges on the back of the door allows part of the door thickness to sit inside the opening.
**Overlay types for frameless cabinets** *(shown with Euro-style hinges)*

- **Full overlay**: A full-overlay door covers all or nearly all of the front edge of the cabinet. This overlay type typically is used for doors at the ends of a cabinet.

- **Half overlay**: This overlay type is commonly used in the middle of a run of cabinets where the doors share a single partition wall. This hinge will allow the door to cover half of the partition wall (or approximately 3/8”). Don’t confuse this with 1/2” overlay, which will allow a door to cover up the cabinet or face frame by 1/2”.

- **Inset**: As on face-frame cabinets, inset door on frameless cabinets fit within the cabinet opening and sit flush with the front edges of the cabinet.

**3. Other things to think about**

» **Decide whether you want to see the hinge**

In some applications, the hinges are used to add stylistic detail to cabinetry; in others, visible hinges would detract from the desired effect. There are three basic options:

- **Concealed hinge**: No part of the hinge is visible from the outside of the cabinet when the door is closed. Ideal for modern, minimalist applications in which visible hardware would detract from the design.

- **Semi-concealed hinge**: A hinge that is at least partly visible from the outside of the cabinet when the door is closed. May incorporate details such as a decorative ball tip or finial tip.

- **Exposed hinge**: A hinge that is fully visible on the outside of the cabinet when the doors are closed.
Decide whether you want a traditional hinge or a European hinge

**Butt hinge:** The quintessential traditional hinge, it has two pivoting plates whose interlocking fingers form a barrel and are held together by a pin. One plate is attached to the door; the other, to the cabinet. Butt hinges sometimes require a mortise in the door and/or the cabinet to prevent an excessive gap.

**Deluxe (adjustable mount) butt hinge:** A butt hinge with elongated mounting slots that allow you to adjust doors horizontally and vertically for a perfect fit.

**Knife hinge:** Shaped like scissors. One half of hinge mounts to top edge (or bottom edge) of door. Other half mounts to horizontal cabinet edge directly above (and below) door.

**European hinge:** A type of concealed hinge especially popular on frameless cabinets but also available for face-frame applications. European hinges have a mounting plate that secures to the cabinet and a cup that seats in a (typically 35mm) circular mortise drilled in the back of the door. One popular benefit of Euro-style hinges is that they offer adjustment in two and sometimes three directions, making it easy to fine-tune the alignment of the door. Side adjustment regulates the gaps between doors, cabinets and walls. Height adjustment aligns doors precisely at top and bottom. Depth adjustment (not always available) lets you bring door faces in line with the vertical front of the cabinet. Another benefit is easy removal of doors for cleaning and refinishing.

**Euro-style hinge anatomy**

[Diagram of Euro-style hinge anatomy]

**WHAT IS SWAGE?**

Also spelled “swag,” this term refers to the bending of one or both leaves at the barrel to reduce the space between them when closed (and eliminate the need for a mortise).
» Take into account how far the door will need to open

How far or to what angle a hinge will allow a door to open is called degree of opening. Some hinges will let the door open just beyond 90°, but others offering a much greater degree of opening are available. For example, a 270° hinge will allow the door to swing back against the cabinet side. (It bears noting, though, that this type of hinge will work only on a frameless cabinet with full overlay doors).

» Decide how you want the hinge to mount to the cabinet and door

Surface-mount hinge: A hinge that does not need a hole or mortise to be drilled in the door or cabinet in order to mount it. It simply mounts to the surface.

Mortised hinge: A hinge that requires the cutting of a mortise or recess in the door or cabinet to fit the hinge leaves for proper mounting.

Wraparound: A style of hinge where the leaves are formed to wrap around the edge of the door and/or the cabinet side or face frame. A partial wraparound hinge will wrap around the door and have a plain flat leaf for the cabinet so it can be used on a frameless cabinet. A full back-to-back wraparound hinge will wrap around on both halves of the hinge so it can be used on a face-frame cabinet.

No-mortise hinge: A style of surface-mounted hinge that screws directly to the cabinet and the door without any mortises or special recesses being cut into the surfaces.

» Decide whether you want any special features

Self-closing hinge: This type of hinge pulls the door shut when it is within a few inches of being closed and keeps it closed. Sometimes called snap-closing.

Self-opening systems: This type of hinge comes with a mechanism that propels the door open when activated by a push.

Soft-close hinge: A hinge that incorporates a mechanism that activates when the door is within a few inches of the shut position and brings it gently closed.

» Buy enough hinges to support your door

Two hinges are enough for many average-size doors. But if you’re working with an especially large or heavy door, you might need more to ensure you get the performance and durability you expect. For Euro-style concealed hinges, use the chart at right to calculate how many hinges you’ll need for a given door height and weight. When in doubt, err on the side of too much support rather than too little.