

Having, needing and feeling with avoir

French 1 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: Avoir means "to have." It is irregular: j'ai, tu as, il/elle/on a, nous avons, vous avez, ils/elles ont. French also uses avoir, not être, for many feelings and for age: avoir faim (to be hungry), avoir froid (to be cold), avoir quinze ans (to be fifteen). Avoir besoin de means "to need."

Level: French 1 (high school, ACTFL Novice) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice Mid, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

How do you conjugate avoir in the present tense?

Avoir means "to have." Its forms do not follow the regular pattern, and the verb is also the helper in the past tense, so learn it early.

Subject	Form	Meaning
j'	ai	I have
tu	as	you have (informal)
il / elle / on	a	he / she / one has
nous	avons	we have
vous	avez	you have (formal or plural)
ils / elles	ont	they have

j'ai

tu as

elle a

avoir

nous avons

vous avez

ils ont

Singular forms on top (blue), plural forms below (red). Only nous avons and vous avez have a full-length ending.

Possession and the negative

Use avoir + a noun to say what someone owns or has: Awa a un vélo rouge. — Awa has a red bike. In the negative, un, une, des become de (or d' before a vowel): Je n'ai pas **de** frère. — I

don't have a brother.

Which feelings does French say with avoir?

English says "I am hungry." French says "I have hunger." These expressions are fixed, so no article is needed.

French	English
avoir faim	to be hungry
avoir soif	to be thirsty
avoir chaud / froid	to be hot / cold
avoir peur (de)	to be afraid (of)
avoir sommeil	to be sleepy
avoir raison / tort	to be right / wrong
avoir besoin de	to need
avoir ... ans	to be ... years old



comfortable zone: no avoir expression needed

Cold and hot feelings are expressed with avoir froid and avoir chaud.

Common mistake

English speakers say Je suis faim or Je suis quinze ans. Both are wrong. Correct: J'ai faim. and J'ai quinze ans. Also, Il a froid describes a person, while Il fait froid describes the weather.

Examples

- Nous avons soif après le match. — We are thirsty after the game.
- Mathis a besoin d'un stylo. — Mathis needs a pen.
- Vous avez raison, Madame. — You are right, ma'am.

Culture note

In Québec, dîner means lunch and souper means dinner. In France, people say déjeuner for lunch and dîner for dinner. Check which one your host family uses before you say J'ai faim !

Zoé's tip

Picture a tiny backpack labeled "I carry hunger." If you carry it, use avoir. Ask yourself: can I say "I have" in a silly way? Then avoir is probably the right verb.

Key points to remember

- Avoir is irregular, so each of the six forms must be memorized.
- J'ai is written with an apostrophe because je drops its e before a vowel sound.
- Hunger, thirst, heat, cold, fear, sleepiness, being right and age all use avoir in French.
- After a negation, un/une/des become de or d' (je n'ai pas de frère).
- Avoir besoin de + noun or infinitive means "to need (something / to do something)."

Having, Needing and Feeling with Avoir: frequently asked questions

How do you say "I am hungry" in French?

Say "J'ai faim," which literally means "I have hunger." French uses avoir for hunger, thirst, cold, heat, fear and sleepiness. Never use être with these expressions.

How do you say your age in French?

Use avoir plus the number plus ans: "J'ai quinze ans." The word ans must stay in the sentence, even though English often drops "years old."

Why is it "j'ai" and not "je ai"?

Je drops its final e before a vowel sound and becomes j'. This is called elision. It also happens with ne (n'ai) and de (d'amis).

What does avoir besoin de mean?

It means "to need." Add a noun after de ("J'ai besoin d'un cahier") or an infinitive ("J'ai besoin de dormir"). Before a vowel, de becomes d'.

What is the difference between il a froid and il fait froid?

Il a froid means a person feels cold. Il fait froid describes the weather: it is cold outside. Only people take avoir; the weather uses faire.