Fists

Fist cracks are also one of the natural sizes, and are relatively easy and straightforward to climb, providing the crack is well sized. However, the ability of your fist to adapt to different crack sizes is very limited — unlike with hands, either your fist fits or it doesn’t, though you can modify how you place that fist to slightly expand its size range (more on that later). It seems like most fist cracks are memorable for being either too tight or too wide. Many climbers seem to have a phobia of fist cracks, which, in my opinion, is unwarranted. The anxiety probably stems from their inability to change their fist size to fit the crack, and the feeling that the jam will pop without warning. To its benefit, a fist jam can be very secure and not strenuous, especially when used passively like a big chock (think of a No. 11 Hex).

A few of the many notables in North America include: SS Maywood (5.10b) at Vedauwoo, Meat Hooks (5.10+) and Wiggins I (5.11-) at Indian Creek, Tulgey Wood (upper pitch, 5.10a) at Devils Tower, and Moby Dick (5.10a) in Yosemite.

Cracks slightly too narrow for your fist can be frustrating, since you can’t shrink your fist. Similarly, cracks a bit too wide are also troublesome in a different way — being technical, insecure, and strenuous. The good news is that special techniques can help at both ends of the spectrum. We’ll start with fist jams for well-sized cracks including a few variations, followed by how you adapt the jams for tighter sizes and wider sizes, respectively.

Basic Fists

The most common (and natural) version is to orient your fist with the knuckles horizontal across the crack and your palm facing down or away from you (see figures to the right). The opposite orientation, with your palm facing up or toward you, is occasionally useful, especially when placed low; but it can feel odd and is less commonly used. In either case, slip in your hand, find the right spot, and clench a fist.

You can effect small differences in width by placing your thumb either inside or outside your fist, or even between your fingers as shown in the figure on the next page. Making the fist with my thumb inside makes a tight knot and feels most solid to me.
**Face Sideways (inside Leg)**

This trick feels odd, but it’s a great jam for your inside foot when your knee doesn’t fit. It works well in both corner cracks and splitters.

Face sideways to the crack (back against the crack wall) and back-step with your inside foot as shown below. Your toes will be pointing down. You’re basically in a traditional OW position, although your inside leg is not buried in the crack. Use your outside leg to push off the face or in a “back heel” foot jam (see the following subsection).

For your upper body, choose from your standard arsenal of arm positions: arm bar, chicken wing, and reverse side-pull. Leaning forward sometimes creates a camming action, making your arms more solid.

When I use a back step, it is commonly as an intermediate jam between other positions, rather than for continuous movement. It makes a nice tactic for your repertoire of techniques.

**Back Heel (with Back Step)**

This is a bizarre and highly effective footwork combination that is useful for tighter-than-knee off-widths. Thanks go to Lamont Smith for this innovation, which can make 5.11 tight OW cracks feel like 5.9.

Back-step with your inside leg (see previous subsection), and then jam your outside foot below with your heel in the crack as shown in the figures above. You’ll naturally be facing sideways or slightly outwards, with your forearm levered/cammed in the crack (being a contortionists helps). Sure, this technique feels weird and contrived — almost like you’re falling out of the crack — but the surprise payoff is that you’re naturally torquing on your arm like a coiled spring, without using much muscle. If it feels all wrong, then you’re doing it all right! Describing a back heel as a foot jam is an oversimplification, since your entire body is involved. To move, shuffle up in small skootches.

I use this technique infrequently and only for tighter-than-knee splitters. I’m solid when fully in this position and I move effectively, but transitioning to/from other positions is tenuous, and I generally prefer more straightforward approaches.
Finding the ideal body position while liebacking in unwisely. Even experienced crack climbers occasionally get “sucked in” to a lieback — beware of the vortex! Because liebacking feels so natural, it is often a convenient alternative when our jamming skills are insufficient, and powerful climbers can often muscle through difficult sections by liebacking. For this reason, jamming purists label it as “the technique of no technique” — in other words, you won’t get any better at crack climbing if this is your default mode when the going gets tough.

However, when done well, liebacking is more subtle and technical than it first appears, and involves a range of skills beyond brute strength and endurance. To develop your liebacking skills, choose nearly any climbing technique and pull through. Although you feel comfortable and can stand nearly straight up, in other situations you need to lean back and pull through. Although Wheat Thin’s individual moves are not especially strenuous, the pump builds with time.

One way of developing finesse is by minimizing the lieback — I think of it as “cheating” the lieback. Use any tricks and skills you can to avoid a powerfest. My experience is that there is a non-linear response: by reducing my arm stress by 15 percent I can double my endurance time, and by reducing arm stress by 30 percent I can hang on indefinitely (your results may vary).

To be most efficient, trend toward a vertical position with your body close to the crack, and your hands well above your feet. Your goal is to near the equilibrium point and to lean back only enough to make your feet stick — any more and you’re wasting precious strength. Often a full-on lieback is not necessary, and a controlled lay-away suffices.

FAR FROM CRACK
Feels Secure -
Arms stressed

CLOSE TO CRACK
Feels Tenuous -
Low Stress on Arms

For an unforgettable experience, try Wheat Thin (5.10c) in Yosemite Valley. The climb ascends a thin, delicate flake located high above the canyon floor, giving it an airy and foreboding feel. A crisp edge on the flake invites you to pull back, and even ardent crack climbers eagerly abandon jamming in favor of a lieback.

Walking up the flake is balancey and committing, which adds to your feeling of exposure. Once you start liebacking, the movement feels fun and natural. However, a couple angled sections will swing your body sideways like a barn door, requiring skillful footwork and balance to stay attached. At times you feel comfortable and can stand nearly straight up, but in other situations you need to lean back and pull through. Although Wheat Thin’s individual moves are not especially strenuous, the pump builds with time.

As a general principle, placing either foot up high seems to work equally well, so do what feels best at the moment.