

Forward Bends

Lesson



Lesson Overview

In this lesson, we examine forward bending poses as a category, and ways to apply this knowledge in teaching.

Objective

Become proficient in the nature and effects of forward bending poses, and considerations for wisely teaching and sequencing them.

Description

Define forward bending, types of forward bends, their effects and examples for each. List contraindications and describe general physical effects and energetic effects of forward bends. Explain the terms “anterior tilt” and “posterior tilt” of the pelvis and what is advisable in forward bending alignment. Provide examples of ways to direct students that will encourage a balance of effort and ease in forward bending and explain how you can individualize teaching of forward bending. Name some forward bending poses that are safest for tight hamstrings and/or back issues and explain how moving into *Uttanasana* (Standing Forward Bend) with a “swan dive” may be risky for flexible practitioners. Describe how you might sequence forward bends and provide a list of forward bending poses.

Introduction

- Forward bending is the act of moving the chest and thighs toward one another.
- We can practice forward bends from a variety of foundations, including standing, seated and supine.
- All forward bends stretch the back of the body.
- The anatomical term, “flexion” refers to decreasing a joint angle. “Spinal flexion” is the anatomical term for forward bending.
- As Olga Kabel so clearly explains [here](#), there are four types of Forward Bends: 1) knees bent, 2) legs extended, 3) asymmetrical legs, and 4) chest raised away from hips. See more on each below.

Knees Bent



- Purpose: Safely stretch low back
- Examples: [Apanasana \(Knees to Chest\)](#), [Balasana \(Child’s Pose\)](#), [Malasana \(Yogic Squat\)](#), [Sasangasana \(Rabbit Pose\)](#)

Legs Extended



- Purpose: Stretch low back, upper back, neck and hamstrings (plus potentially inner legs and/or calves)

- Examples: Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend), Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide Legged Standing Forward Bend), Upavistha Konasana (Seated Wide Leg Forward Bend), Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose)

Asymmetrical Legs



- Purpose: Identify and address asymmetries
- Examples: Janu Sirsasana (Head to Knee Pose), Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch / Pyramid Pose), Tiriang Mukha Eka Pada Paschimottanasana (Three-Limbed Forward Bend), Krounchasana (Heron Pose)

Chest Raised Away From Hips



- Purpose: Strengthen upper and lower back
- Examples: Padangustha Dandasana (Staff Hold Big Toes Pose), Ardha Uttanasana (Half Way Lift), Utkatasana (Fierce / Chair Pose)

Contraindications

Kyphosis

In the case of Kyphosis (also called Hyperkyphosis or Thoracic Kyphosis), forward bending (spinal flexion) of any sort is contraindicated.

Sciatic Pain

In the case of sciatic pain, sometimes forward bends are completely avoided. Other experts recommend avoiding seated forward bends and those with a twisting component such as *Janu Sirsasana* (Head to Knee Pose). Generally, forward bends done on the back such as *Apanasana* (Knees to Chest) are considered safer.

Strenuous Forward Bends

Strenuous forward bends are typically not advised in the following cases. These conditions indicate a need for particular care in choosing forward bend variations and alternatives, and promoting safe practice.

Pain

- Any case where pain is experienced during forward bending, including degenerative discs, low back strain or any acute injury

Back Issues

- Disc Injury, recent or acute
- Disc Herniation
- Osteoporosis of the thoracic spine
- Spinal Stenosis, when instructed by healthcare provider to minimize forward bends
- Spinal surgery, recent

More

- Hamstring tendonitis, when there is pain in hamstrings during forward bending
- Hernia or abdominal wall separation if increased bulging in those areas is created by forward bending
- Pregnancy, 2nd & 3rd trimesters

Effects / Benefits

People Experience Poses Differently

- The following effects may be associated with this category of poses.
- Knowing such common effects is typically useful for planning sequences. However, since there are no universal truths in how different people experience poses, please use caution with this information.
- For example, rather than telling students what to expect when practicing a pose or technique, you may wish to invite them to take note of effects on their breathing and their mind, and what they feel in their body.

See Also

- [Wise Word Choice](#)
- [Inclusive & Accepting Word Choice](#)
- [Asana Categories Hub](#)
- [Planning & Sequencing Hub](#)



Physical Effects

1. Stretch, lengthen, “open” back side of body.
2. Increase space and circulation between vertebrae.
3. Release tension and improve circulation in ankles, feet, legs, knees, hips, back and neck.
4. “Stimulate” or “massage” abdominal organs, which then stimulates digestion, elimination and reproduction.
5. “Rest...the heart.” (Donna Farhi)

FREE THE SPINE

The spine, especially, is taught to lengthen, increasing the space and circulation between the vertebrae. This is important because the spine is the... freeway from your brain to the entire body... Nerves throughout the body have their origin in the spinal cord. As they are freed and fed, nourished and healed you will experience more vitality. As the spine and backside of the body is being stretched, the front side is firmed and toned. – **Erich Schiffmann**

PRACTICE HEALTHY MOVEMENT PATTERNS

A yoga practice with too much emphasis on aggressive forward bending can be risky, particularly if the student has tight hamstrings and a flattened curve in the lower back. A well-constructed yoga routine, however, can be an ideal way to learn to stretch without creating or exacerbating back pain, and a chance to practice good alignment and movement patterns which help protect the back from injury. – **Julie Gudmestad**



Energetic Effects

1. Provide “cooling,” calming, quieting effect.
2. Restore nervous system.
3. Turn senses inward.
4. Draw focus to present moment.
5. Awaken and balance lower chakras: muladhara, svadhisthana and manipura.
6. Forward bends may reveal emotions hidden in the body. Holding forward bends and hip opening poses for longer periods (while refining the flow of breath) may “allow students to safely explore these feelings.” (Mark Stephens)

MOVE AWARENESS INWARD

As we bend forward or twist our bodies, we curve our awareness back toward ourselves, looking inward to find the stillness of our center. As we learn to surrender and release into that return, we can recuperate from the outward actions of our busy everyday lives, taking solace in self-reflection. This movement inward is like the coiling action of the spring, and is the necessary precursor to our uncoiling into our next project, activity, or growth spurt. – **Donna Farhi**

EXPERIENCE PRESENCE, BE HUMBLD

Lengthening the backside of your body — legs, back, and neck — frees you from the past, so you’re no longer bothered by events or circumstances that occurred earlier in your life... This helps you experience your newness in the now. Done properly, forward bends simulate bowing and are humbling. – **Erich Schiffmann**

Alignment: Pelvic Tilt



MANY STUDENTS NEED GUIDANCE TO PRACTICE FORWARD BENDS SAFELY

I've heard teachers wax poetic about seated forward-bending poses, like *Paschimottasana*. How helpful they are for calming the nervous system, quieting the mind, for turning inward, and so on. Meanwhile, my hamstrings would be screaming, my lower back starting to ache, and my mind racing, asking "When will this pose end, and what the heck is this teacher talking about?!"... I've observed that only about 10 percent of students find them physically easy and accessible as they are typically presented, and the other 90 percent need some serious guidance to do them safely.

– Baxter Bell

Anterior & Posterior Tilt

The position of the pelvis governs the relationship of the spine to the legs and is a key element of proper alignment in *asana*:

- When the pelvis tilts forward, it is in anterior tilt.
- When it tilts back it is in posterior tilt.

Using the image of the pelvis as a bowl of water:

- In anterior tilt, the pubic bone moves toward the earth and we pour the water out along the front line of the body.
- In a posterior tilt, the pubic bone moves toward the navel to pour the water out along the back body.

If the sacrum doesn't tip forward in forward bends (such as when tight hamstrings pull down on sit bones), the low back will be stretched and potentially strained, putting it at risk.

Sit Upright

- In seated forward bends, a fundamental starting point is sitting upright as opposed to sitting back on the sit bones.
- Assess student in Dandasana (Staff Pose). Is she able to attain pelvic neutrality with the sacrum tilted slightly forward? Or is she rocking back with low back rounding? Add props under pelvis until an upright seat is achieved. Have student work there to elongate spine. (Mark Stephens, *Teaching Yoga* 2010, p 215)

ON BOTH SIT BONES, LOW BACK LIFTING

It's important that you're sitting upright on both sitting bones with your low back lifting in and up... If your hamstrings, hips or low back feel tight, sit on a firmly folded blanket, turning your inner thighs down. – Meagan McCrary

MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake in any forward fold poses... is to round the spine excessively and collapse in the front of the body. This is usually because we're tempted to pull ourselves deeper toward our toes... However, too much rounding can cause muscle strain, or in extreme cases, a torn ligament or a ruptured disc. Additionally, when you round the back, you just aren't getting the intended benefit of the pose in other areas of your body, such as your hamstrings. – Maren Hunsberger

Internally Rotate the Thighs

As Meagan McCrary teaches, when the legs are turned out, the pelvis will naturally tuck under and cause the low back to round. Therefore, one approach in seated forward bends to help achieve a neutral pelvis is to manually rotate the thighs inward. With hands around thighs, turn the inner thighs down, "widening your seat, and lifting your sitting bones back up."

Moving from Anterior to Posterior Tilt

A key teaching for safe and effective forward bending has been to teach students to enter forward bends with an anterior tilt of the pelvis. This is a critical teaching to counter the common tendency of folding from the low back, which places undue pressure on the lumbar spine. Experts now typically advise that forward bends begin with an anterior tilt followed by allowing the pelvis to move into posterior tilt.

INITIATE WITH HINGE AT HIPS

The anterior tilt of the pelvis is critical to safe forward bending of the spine. Often, yoga students will "fold" from their lower backs, which places too much pressure on the lumbar spine and can lead to injury. A safe forward bend is initiated with a hinge at the hips, which requires a slight anterior tilt. – Allison Ray Jeraci

MOVING FROM ANTERIOR TO POSTERIOR TILT

As we move deeper into our folds, the pelvis must be allowed to move from its neutral position—i.e., a slight anterior tilt—into posterior tilt (and the lower back allowed to round), or we risk damaging the cartilage of the hips (something Reif explains in greater detail in "Which Way Should You Tilt Your Pelvis in Backbends and Forward Folds?") ... Somewhere between *dandasana* (staff pose) and *paschimottanasana* (seated forward bend), between *ardha uttanasana* (half standing forward bend) and *uttanasana* (standing forward bend), we must relinquish our anterior pelvic tilts, allowing our pelvises to move posteriorly and our spines to round. – Amber Burke

THE SECRET IS LENGTH, NOT DEPTH

Once you've extended your spine, you can begin to fold deeper. Note that some rounding will occur as you deepen your fold, but do continue lengthening the back of your neck. Remember, the secret is length, not depth, so if you want to get the most out of your seated forward folds, keep your legs active and your spine as long as possible. – Meagan McCrary

No Absolutes

While there are a number of alignment cues that aim to keep the spine safe for most populations, yoga *asana* doesn't deal in absolutes. "Always" and "never," when referring to an approach or alignment in a particular pose, may not be appropriate for every practitioner during every practice. Timothy McCall offers insight as to why we might approach forward bends with a slight posterior tilt vs. anterior tilt for certain conditions. Referring to the notion that there is only one correct way to practice, he suggests:

The reality is that it always depends. What are you trying to achieve? What poses have preceded it and what do you plan to do after it in your practice? Are there contraindications you need to consider? Are there quirks in your anatomy or injuries you need to work around? – **Timothy McCall**

More Low Body Alignment

Knees & Feet

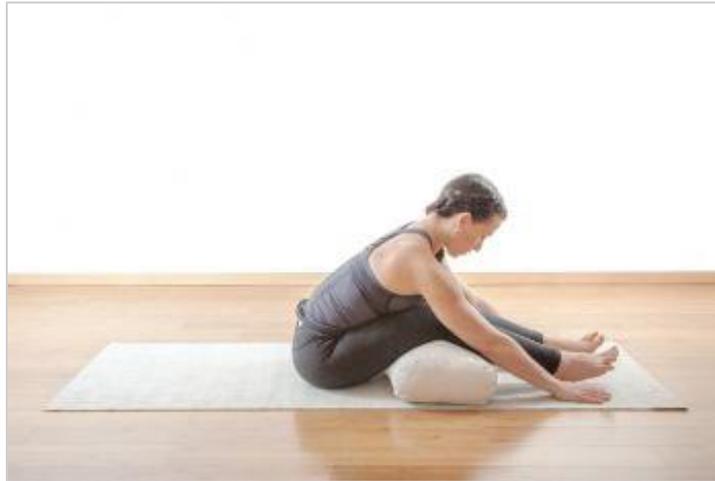
- In the case of seated forward bends, kneecaps point straight up (and McCrary advises that second toes do as well).
- In standing forward bends, feet and kneecaps are pointing forward.

Engage Backs of Legs

Your legs and pelvis (sitting bones) form the foundation in [seated] forward folds. Work the legs and pelvis as described for *Tadasana* (Mountain Pose). – **Bruce Bowditch**

- The task is to engage the legs.
- In seated forward bends, actively press "down through the backs of your legs, inner thighs, and heels." (Meagan McCrary)
- In standing forward bends, press into big toes to keep pelvis from moving back behind heels and then activate/contact quadriceps.
- Teaching anatomical techniques, particularly which muscle to contract so that another will elongate, can help students find more ease and depth in their practice while also giving them tools to increase awareness. For more information, see [Muscle Movement](#) and [Flexibility & Stretching](#).

More Alignment & Safety Considerations



- Tight hamstrings will inhibit tipping forward and can put student at risk in forward bends.
- One of the few Yoga Sutras that refers to the physical postures is “sthira sukham asanam,” meaning that *asana* should be a balance of effort and ease. In forward bends, the effort is in lengthening the limbs and the spine and the ease can be achieved through softening and relaxing into the pose in a complementary way.
- An instructional tool can be to guide students in terms of their maximum effort. For example, “Find 50% of your maximum forward bend and breathe there.”
- Bending knees and using props are key tools for many to find proper alignment and ease in forward bends.
- Supine forward bends such as Apanasana (Knees to Chest) and Supta Padangusthasana (Reclined Hand to Foot Pose) are the safest type of forward bends for tight hamstrings and/or back issues such as disk injuries.
- Moving into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) with a “swan dive” can prompt flexible practitioners to create excessive lumbar arch and putting them at risk. Instead, “we want pelvis and upper body moving as a unit.” For more information, see How to Bend Forward Without Stressing the Spine.
- For one author’s teaching approach to keeping knees safe in hip opening poses, see How to Avoid Hurting Yourself During Hip Opener Yoga Poses. Her perspective focuses on cues to inspire conscious strengthening via particular leg actions.

CHOOSE FORWARD BENDS WITH CAUTION

You should avoid sitting forward bends, especially if you have a history of lower back pain or injury, until you can stretch your leg straight up to 90 degrees or more. If you are in a class where forward bends are being taught, you can always substitute some simple leg and hip stretches like Supta Padangusthasana and Supta Baddha Konasana. – Julie Gudmestand

Sequencing Considerations



The intensity of stretch in forward bends can range from relatively mild—in such poses as Apanasana (Knees to Chest)— to quite deep — as in Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend). When sequenced earlier in class forward bends tend to be mild, of course, helping to prepare for other poses while providing a gentle energetic arc to class. When sequenced near the end of class, they may be deeper stretches while energetically providing a cooling and quieting effect.

Take Care

- It is often advised to sequence standing poses prior to deep seated forward bends because of the hip opening and mobility required to enter these poses safely.
- Hip stretching helps prepare for forward bends.
- Students may find that it helps to soften the knees during forward bends (especially at the beginning of class) in order to gradually create space in the back body as the spine is mobilized.

SEATED FORWARD BENDS WITH A FIXED PELVIS REQUIRE PREPARATION

When the position of the pelvis is fixed, the connection points between the pelvis and the moving body parts (spine and legs) will be challenged a lot, especially when you leverage yourself with the weight of the body and/or your arms. When I talk about connection points, I mean SI joints (which link your spine to your pelvis), and hip joints (which link your legs to your pelvis). So seated positions can be rather stressful for those areas, and those places need to be adequately warmed up and prepared for that sort of challenge. Often your students come to your yoga class shortly after waking up or after sitting all day – their hips and backs will be stiff. If you ask them to fold into Gomukasana right off the bat, you are risking injury to their hip joints simply because they are not ready for that. – Olga Kabel

Pratikriyasana (Counterpose)

- Restorative backbends and poses that activate the hamstrings serve as excellent counterposes to deep forward bends. For example, if teaching an intensive forward bending series, countering with a gentle backbend such as Setu Bandhasana (Bridge Pose) can reintegrate hamstrings.

- Another way to counter the deep hamstring opening while still cooling the body and maintaining the introspective qualities of forward bends, is to extend alternating legs back from a table top position while mindfully engaging the hamstrings and glutes.
- In general, it is not recommended to sequence deep backbends such as [Urdhva Dhanurasana \(Upward Bow / Wheel Pose\)](#) or [Ustrasana \(Camel Pose\)](#) immediately following a deep forward bend. To illustrate why, imagine a paper clip that you've extended into a long, straight segment of wire. If you were to bend the paper clip completely in half at the center in one direction and then immediately bend it in the other direction, chances are it will weaken over time or even snap. While the spine is more resilient than a paper clip, this equal and opposite action can cause detrimental effects if repeated regularly. To avoid over-straining the spine, consider a gentle neutralizing series of mild forward bends, followed by twists and lateral bends before offering a deeper counterpose.

The Universal Neutralizer

The *viniyoga* tradition views forward bends as universal neutralizers for all other directional movements of the spine. The forward bends are considered “the hub of the wheel”, with back bends, lateral bends and twists forming the spokes of the wheel. It means that we would never place a backbend and lateral bend next to each other, or a backbend next to a twist – there always will be a forward bend of some sort in between. — **Olga Kabel**

More

- To learn more about how forward bends can serve as counterbalancing postures for all ranges of motion in the spine, see: [Sequencing Fundamentals](#).
- For sequences focused on forward bending, see: [Sequence Library: Asana Category Themed Classes](#).

Wisdom and Inspiration



DRAW US INTO THE INNER MYSTERIES

Forward bends draw us into the inner mysteries and dynamics of our lives. – **Mark Stephens**

BRING THE BRAIN AND HEART TO A RESTFUL STATE

[Forward Bends] bring the brain and heart to a restful state... soothe the brain, creating a cooling sensation, while at the same time stimulating the digestive system, toning the abdominal organs and keeping them free from sluggishness. – **Geeta S. Iyengar**

PATIENCE REQUIRED

In folding forward we stretch & expose the vulnerable backside of our bodies, most of which we will never directly see. To fully release into forward bends, we must let go of an entire chain of muscles that start in the plantar fascia of the feet & move through the achilles tendons, gastroc & soleus in the lower legs, hamstrings & some adductors on the backs & insides of the thighs, glutes, piriformis & quadratus lumborum around the back of the pelvis & into the lower back, and then the muscles across the entire back, primarily the spinal erectors & multifidi (Aldous 2004,65). This release requires patience as the backside gradually releases and allows the graciousness of the forward bend to manifest; when pursued aggressively, injury to the hamstrings or lower back is likely. – **Mark Stephens**

See Also:

1. Anatomy & Physiology: [Muscle Movement](#)
2. Anatomy & Physiology: [Flexibility & Stretching](#)
3. Safety & Adaptations: [Hip Issues](#)
4. Safety & Adaptations: [Low Back Pain](#)

Online Resources

Please see [online version](#) for links to more resources.