



FORWARD BENDING

RETURNING AWARENESS BACK TOWARD OURSELVES

As we bend forward... 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.

– Donna Farhi

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- What is forward bending and what is a common effect of all types of forward bends?
- What is the anatomical term for forward bending?
- For what conditions are forward bends contraindicated?
- What are the general physical effects of forward bends? Energetic effects?
- What is meant by the terms “anterior tilt” and “posterior tilt” of the pelvis?
- Describe generally advised forward bending alignment in terms of anterior and posterior tilt of the pelvis.
- Give two examples of ways to find a balance of effort and ease in forward bending.
- How can you use *Dandasana* (Staff Pose) to learn about yourself in relation to forward bending?
- Name some forward bending poses that are safest for tight hamstrings and/or back issues such as disk injuries.

INTRODUCTION



Forward bending is the act of moving the chest and thighs toward one another.



Forward bends stretch the back of the body.



Forward bends can be practiced from a variety of foundations, including standing, seated and supine.



Spinal flexion is the anatomical term for forward bending.



The term “flexion” refers to decreasing a joint angle.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS

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

ENERGETIC EFFECTS

- Cooling, calming, quieting
- Restores nervous system
- Turns senses inward
- Draws focus to present moment
- Associated with lower three *chakras*
- Forward bends may reveal emotions hidden in the body. Holding forward bends and hip stretching poses for longer periods (with breath awareness) may be a safe way to explore such feelings.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Strenuous forward bends are typically not advised in these cases:
- Recent spinal surgery
- Recent or acute disc injury
- Any case where pain is experienced during forward bending
- Osteoporosis of the thoracic spine
- Herniated discs anywhere along the spine
- Spinal stenosis, as instructed by healthcare provider
- Second and third trimester of pregnancy
- Abdominal hernias or abdominal wall separation if increased bulging during forward bending
- Hamstring tendonitis, when there is pain

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



CONTRAINDICATIONS & EFFECTS

ANTERIOR PELVIC TILT

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



POSTERIOR PELVIC TILT

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



PELVIC TILT

Safe and effective forward bending begins with a focus on an anterior tilt of the pelvis. This is critical for countering the common tendency of folding from the low back, which places too much pressure on the lumbar spine. Then, allow the pelvis to move into posterior tilt.

MORE PRACTICE TIPS

Forward bends from the back 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.

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. More ways to think about balancing effort and ease:

- Rather than using maximum effort, experiment with 50% of your maximum forward bend and breathe there.
- Bend the knees.
- In seated forward bends, place a prop under the knees.



Sit in *Dandasana* (Staff Pose). If you are unable to sit with sacrum tilted slightly forward, increase prop height until the pelvis is in neutral. Work from there to elongate the spine.

SIT UPRIGHT ON BOTH SIT BONES

The most common misalignment of any seated postures is rocking back on the sitting bones, tilting the pelvis and rounding the low back—making it nearly impossible to extend the spine. 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