

Benefits:

Strengthens biceps, shoulders & lower back, spine, abdominals;

loosens spine, hamstrings, shoulders and front of chest; builds stamina.

Time to Do: 5 minutes

Body Parts Used by This Posture:

Shoulders, chest, spine, abdominals, biceps, hamstrings

Build Up to This Posture with:

Bust Expansion, Elbow Opener,

Wood Chopper, Leg Clasp, Back Stretch, Cobra, Sitting or Standing Wide Angle Pose

Energy Center Used: Belly, Solar Plexus, Heart, Throat

Best Breathing Themes: Any breathing theme that helps you let go, like the Red Level Breathing Themes. It goes well with Blue Level, since the movements flow well with the breath, giving you a sense of peace. To use the pose for building power, use the Fifth Breathing Theme. Or, to build flexibility, use a Breathing Theme that easing you into and out of the pose without long holds, like the Yellow Level Breathing Themes.

Try Learning First: Bust Expansion, Wood Chopper



Chest Expansion is an excellent way to build up breathing muscles in your entire body while developing upper body strength, good shoulder rotation and while loosening the hamstrings. It's great for people who are trying to retrain their bodies for better balance. It's also one of the top poses I recommend for swimmers.

Start in Mountain Pose

- Arms resting loosely by your sides
- Notice where your weight falls on your feet. You want your weight to rest in the center of each foot, not too far forward toward the toes or too far back, and you need your weight to be more or less even between the left and right foot. Use gentle swaying motions of your body to even it out.
- Knees are straight, but not tight, not 'locked'.



Safety Tip Have a slight Pelvic Tilt. This will straighten you up and will protect your lower back during the back bend.



Tip: With your fingers laced together, reach slightly toward the bottom of your bum. This will rotate your shoulders a little and straighten out your arms into the proper alignment.

- Reach your arms behind you.
- Lace your fingers together, knuckles pointed downward.
- Elbows should be straight but not tight.

**Rotate your arms upward**

This is done like the Bust Expansion.

Imagine your shoulders are at the center of a wheel and your arms are spokes. As you draw your arms upward, it will be like drawing a circle with your hands or like a wheel turning. (Not like pulling your arms up toward your shoulders.) Continue this movement until you have a noticeable stretch, but not to your limit.

You will feel this in your biceps, (upper arms), shoulders and possibly in the front of your chest and hands.

Keep your arms in the position while you do the back bend and forward bend parts of this pose.

For the Back Bend

Safety Tip Before you begin the back bend, take a moment to feel yourself growing a little taller, (elongating your spine), as you breathe in. Keep this slight elongation or stretch in your spine as you do the back bend. It will protect your lower back and allow you to stretch farther.



With your spine elongated – stretch upward and backward at the same time. Imagine the top of your head stretching away from your body while your chest stretches upward and your body stretches back. Feel your spine arching.

Continue this movement until your lower back is about to feel pressure or until you lose confidence. Do not bend your knees. It's all done with the spine and the abdominals.



Tip: If you start to feel like you're going to tip over, notice your feet. See that your weight is in the center of each foot.

Tip: This movement increases dramatically with the breath out. So take a few breaths as you explore stretching into the pose more and more.

You will feel this in your spine, your shoulders, the front of your chest and your abdominals.

**When you have reached your limit, pause.
Reverse your movements to come up.**

Safety Tip It's important to keep the stretch in your spine as you come up. Rather than just lift your body up, return to your starting position by reversing your movements.

Once you are standing upright again – check your posture.

See that you still have:

- a pelvic tilt
- an elongated spine
- knees that are straight but not tight



For the Forward Bend

Stretch your body upward along your spine while folding at the waste. Imagine your hip joint is the center of a wheel and your body is a spoke in the wheel. Your head is at the outside of the wheel, drawing a big circle as it comes forward and down.



Safety Tip Keep your body stretching forward along your spine as you fold forward. This will protect your back.

Safety Tip Fold at the waste, or, more precisely, at the hip joint. This folding movement is like a door closing on a hinge. Do not hunch your back or drop your head.

Your arms are held in their original stretch, slightly away from your body. Allow them to move forward naturally, following your body downward

Do not bend your knees to get more extension. If your hamstrings are tight, you won't stretch very far with this pose, however, you're going to make more progress, sooner, if you just go as far as you can with your knees straight, (but not tight)

You will feel this in your lower back and in your hamstrings. Your arms are still stretching your shoulders and biceps.

Continue to rotate forward as you breathe out, feeling your body slowly settling into the stretch.

Finally – draw your arms upward more, rotating them more, increasing their stretch. You'll find that now that you're in the forward bend, your arms will be much more willing to stretch and rotate, giving you an unusual amount of extension.



Hold this position as you breathe in and out, for 4 – 6 breaths or until you're sure you've reached your limit. Notice that, as you breathe out, your body will relax and be more ready to stretch farther.

Tip for More Extension

Once you feel like you've reached the limit of your ability to stretch, hold the pose a little longer and see what parts of your body you can let go of and relax. Then see if the stretch will go any farther as you breathe out.

Release the pose by reversing your movements,

Safety Tip Keep your body and spine elongated as you come up. This will protect your back.

Breathing



In Mountain Pose
– breathe in and out, feeling your body sinking into place, feeling your weight drop downward, feeling your muscles letting go.



Continue breathing in and out as you lace your fingers behind your back and settle them into place.



Breathe in
Breathing out, rotate your arms.

Breathing in – elongate your spine.
Breathing out – go into the back bend.
Breathing in – pause your movements
Breathing out – continue to stretch more into the back bend.



Continue in this way until you're sure you've reach your limit.

Pause the breath and the stretch

Breathing in
– come up





Breathing out – stretch forward into the forward bend, completing the movement and rotating your shoulders to their limit as you finish breathing out.

Hold the pose as you breathe in and out.

Breathing out – see if you can gain any more extension.

Release the pose, coming up as you breathe in

Common Errors

In the Back Bend

- Not elongating the spine.
- Bending the knees.
- Dropping the head. Head and neck should stay in line with the spine.

In the Forward Bend

- Hunching the back and shoulders. (Not elongating the spine.)
- Bending the knees.
- Dropping the arms down to the back.
- Lifting out of the forward bend by just lifting the back up. The movement needs to include a forward stretching of the body, to protect the lower back.

Encouragement

This is a complex, demanding pose that involves a series of movements to be done well together. So, I strongly encourage you to learn the Bust Expansion first and also the Wood Chopper to master the basic movements first. Then they will combine more easily and with less risk of injury.