

Forward Bends

We all have the image in our minds of the yogi who bends forward like a piece of paper folding in two. Then their legs and arms zip in and out of their folded frame, until, voila, Yoga Pretzel.

OK, well, maybe they've practiced a bit. However, much of what they do isn't about practice or noodle-like flexibility or sitting on mountain tops. It's just a bit of know how.

That know how includes certain fundamental principles that give you better extension and reduce your risk of injury.



Forward Bends are part of that bag of tricks. There are some key principles that can allow you to bend farther forward:

Starting with Elongation of the Spine



Elongation of the Spine is where we slightly separate the vertebrae, the bones in your back, from each other, so you become a little taller. It's what you get when you strap yourself to a Medieval torture rack and tell people to Pull! However, the same results can be achieved much more simply than that, with far less help from modern technology.

Think of your spine as a series of pearls on a string. The pearls are held together by knots in the string, but the string itself is slightly elastic. When someone lengthens the elastic, the pearls separate slightly.



Normal Spine

Elongated Spine

That's what we're looking for in your spine. Imagine your spine is held together by an elastic string, and that the string comes out the top of your head. Imagine someone is pulling on the string very slightly. The bones along your spine will separate a little bit and you'll grow a little taller.

This extra 'height' will give you more flexibility and will protect your lower back from strain.

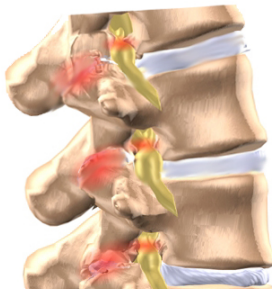
With elongation of the spine, you become more flexible because the bones in your back don't bump into each other as easily. You can bend farther before the vertebrae rub up against each other and stop your movement.

Here's an example of what a normal spine looks like when it tries to bend backward.



You can see how the bones in the vertebra crunch into each other. This is as far as this spine is going to bend.

Now, here's an elongated spine:



You can see that, by having that little extra distance between the bones, you'll be able to bend your spine farther before you get to that 'crunch point'.

This principle works the same with bending forward as well.

So, when doing forward bends and back bends, take the time to elongate your spine, feeling yourself grow a little taller. This will give you more flexibility in your back and will make you feel like you're doing very well. 😊

The key is to feel like you're growing taller, but not like you're working hard at it. The minute you feel like you're straining to get as tall as possible, you are tightening up the muscles in your back, which will make you *less* flexible. So you're looking for the feeling of being about a quarter inch taller. You will feel straighter, but you won't feel like you're 'working hard' at it.

Forward Bend Trick #2 Keeping your arms well extended

As you go into a forward bend, you are usually bringing your arms forward as well, stretching them over your head. This is meant to keep your spine well elongated and to draw tension away from your lower back.

In order to achieve these goals well, you need to think of your arms as an extension of your back. To do this, reach your arms overhead, have them in line with your ears, so that the full length of your arms are in line with the sides of your body: your hands arms and body form one continuous line.

Next, you need to draw your arms upward, stretching them so that there is traction all along your arms. 'Traction' is not 'tension'. You are simply aiming for your fullest reach without straining. But also you are not holding your arms like limp spaghetti noodles.



As you reach your arms to their fullest extension, you'll feel your back stretching a little. That tells you that you've achieved the elongation you're looking forward. Now, to have this in a relaxed state, allow your shoulders to stay loose. Let them drop down a little.

As you fold forward, you need to keep this traction in your arms. Keep your arms reaching as an extension of your body. Also be sure to keep your arms beside your ears to keep the alignment right.

This reaching with your arms will take some of the strain off your lower back, so that you can fold forward without injuring yourself.