

Forward Bends

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE



Effects & Benefits

- Releases the entire back of the body
- Engages and activates the front of the body
- Cooling, calming, soothing, restful
- Familiarises the body with supportive functional movements for every-day life
- Stimulates abdominal organs
- Draws attention inwards, releases external distractions
- Aids interoception
- Variety: can be prone, supine, seated, standing
- Good preparation for seated postures of meditation
- “Tones your patience muscles” (Mukunda Stiles)

“As we bend forward..., we curve our awareness back toward ourselves, looking inward to find the stillness of our centre.

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 ~

Myth...

**“I’d love to
come to
yoga, but I
can’t touch
my toes”**



Anatomy of Forward Bends

- 2 areas of flexion: hip and lumbar spine
- Aided by gravity

Average range of movement:

Hip:	122° (25-39 years)
Cervical spine (neck):	10-80 °
Thoracic spine (chest):	30-40 °
Lumbar spine (low back):	50-60 °

Functional movement hips e.g. sitting & bending to tie a shoelace: 115 °

Paschimottanasana chest to thighs: 180 °

The action of the Hips & Pelvis

It is movement at the hip joint that gives us the greatest degree of flexion in forward bends

The head of the thigh bone sits within the socket in the pelvis (acetabulum)

This joint allows the pelvis to move and tilt over the top of the thigh bone, tilting the pelvis forwards (anterior tilt)

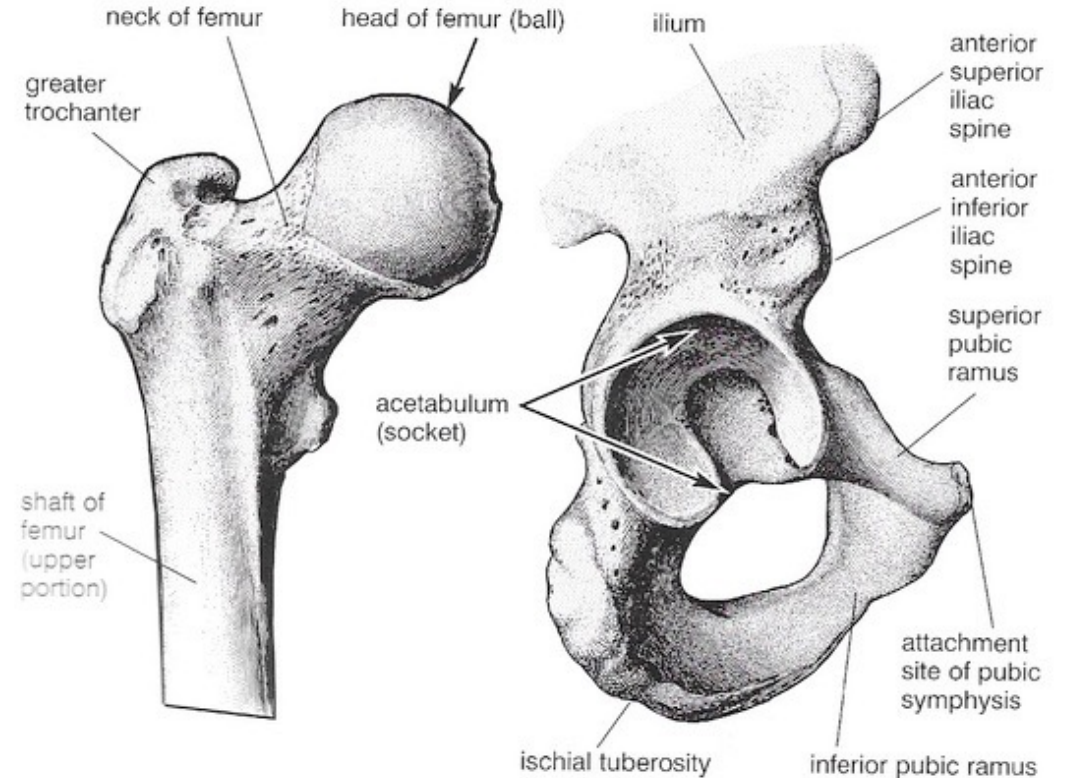
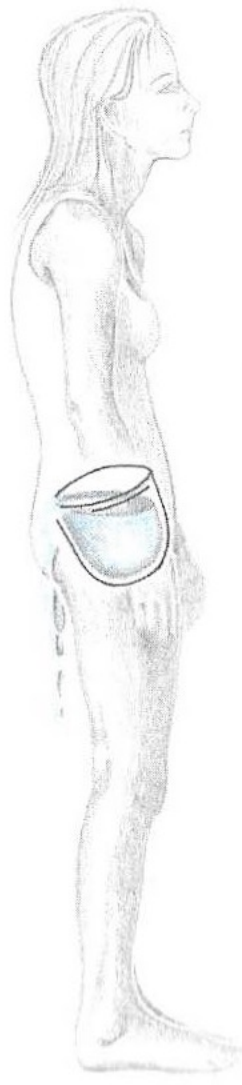


Figure 3.5. Right femur (on the left) as viewed from the front, and right hip bone (on the right) as viewed from the side. The head of the femur fits snugly into the acetabulum, forming a ball-and-socket joint (Sappey).

Image credit: Anatomy of Hatha Yoga, Coulter



39A. Normal



39B. Hypolordotic (flat lower back)



39C. Hyperlordotic (swayback)

Image credit: Yoga Mind, Body & Spirit, Donna Farhi

Muscles of Forward Bends: Hips

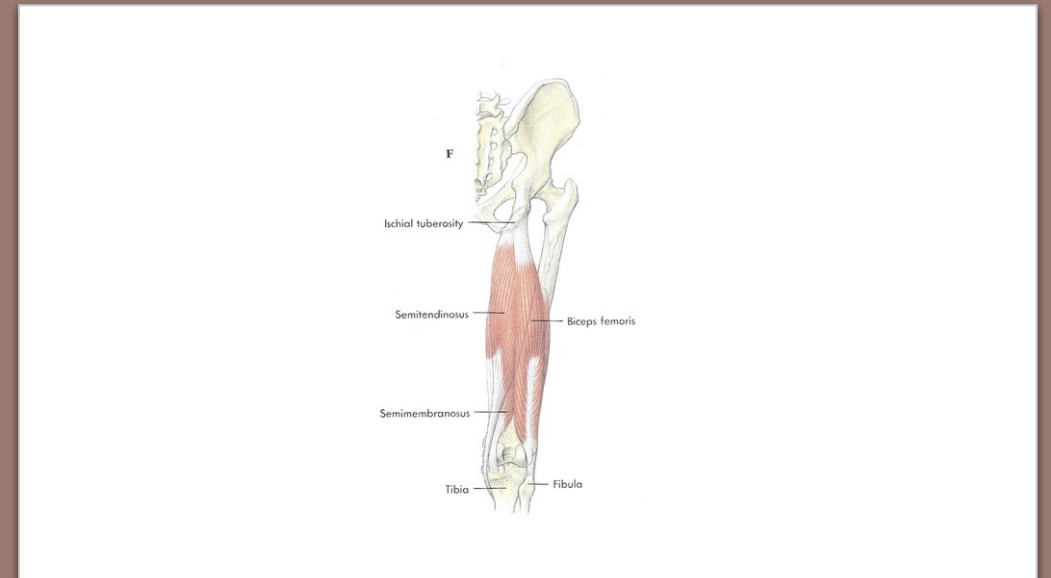
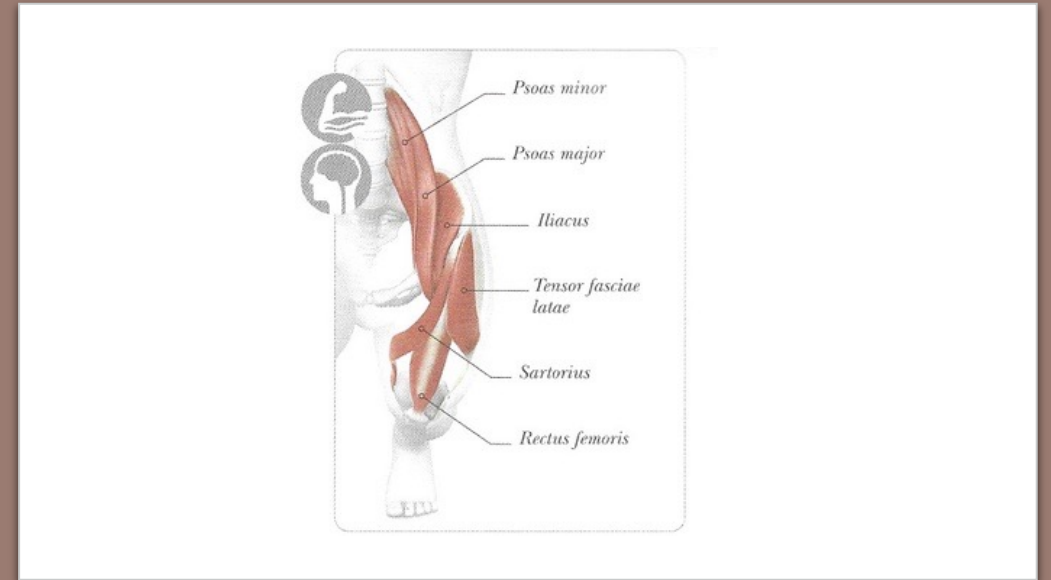
Prime Movers (engaged/working):

Hip Flexors (Psoas Major,
Iliacus), Quads (Rectus Femoris)

Antagonists (releasing):

Hamstrings

Gluteus Maximus
(glutes not shown)

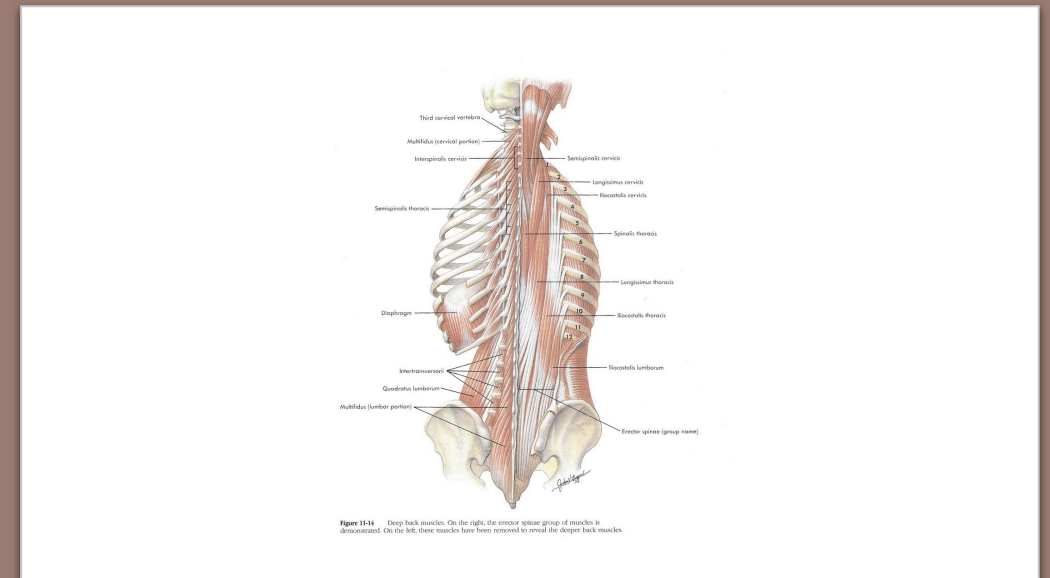
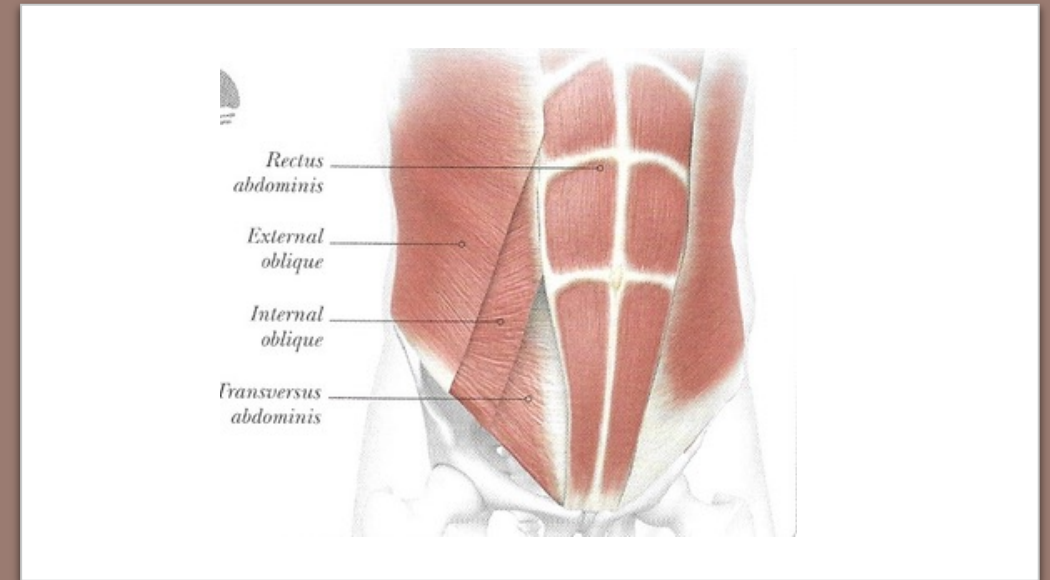


Muscles of Forward Bends: Lumbar Spine

**Prime movers
(engaged/working):**

Rectus Abdominis & External /
Internal obliques

Antagonists (releasing):
Erector Spinae



What might restrict the movement?

- Tight hamstrings and/or adductors limiting anterior/forward tilt of pelvis
- Fascial tightness/restrictions
- Bony stop (e.g. hip socket / bony prominence of pelvis)
- ‘Soft’ compression (e.g. belly/chest)
- Rushing and end-gaming



What can you spot here? What might help?



How can we make forward bends more accessible?

- Bend knees to prevent posterior pelvic tilt (tight hamstrings/adductors)
- When seated, use props to encourage anterior pelvic tilt (block, wedge, folded blanket)
- Take legs wider if there is hard/soft compression
- Use bricks/chair to support standing forward folds
- Can you think of any others?

When practicing...

- Focus on anterior (forward) tilt of the pelvis while maximising the neutral extension of the spine.
- Keep the front of the body active, avoid 'collapsing'
- Keep legs engaged
- Allow the breath to lead you: inhale lift and lengthen, exhale and soften into where the breath leads you.
- Avoid legs rotating externally (feet pointing outwards) if possible
- Keep your head in line with the spine, avoiding jutting the chin upward and compressing the back of the neck
- Practice with an attitude of curiosity and non-attachment to results
- Yield with gravity
- "Alignment before range" Judith Hanson Lasater

Image credit: Jessamyn Stanley – link to a wonderful interview with Jessamyn [here](#)



Preparing & Counterpose

Preparing the body:

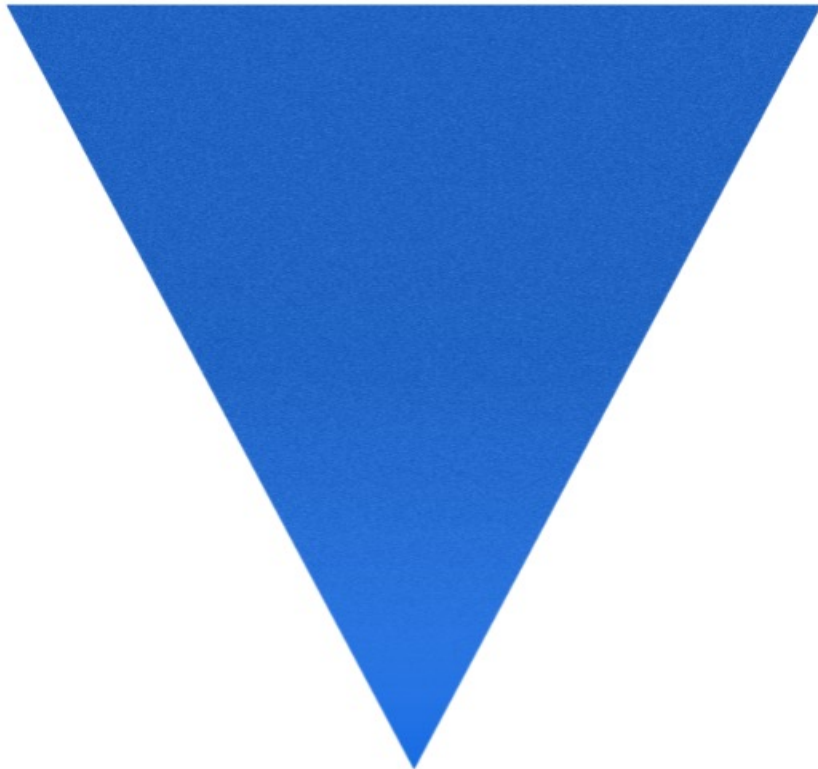
- Warm & release hamstrings, adductors and spine (e.g. hamstring stretch, hip circles, cat, vrksasana - tree)
- Warm the hips (e.g. warriors, tree, butterfly, chair pose)
- Lengthen the spine (axial extension) e.g. dog/swan

Counterposes

- Neutral spine e.g. tadasana, dandasana, semi supine
- Gentle backbends e.g. bridge supported with a brick
- Remember: a counterpose should be more subtle than the original posture

Sequencing forward bends

Greatest lumbar load



Least lumbar load

Sitting + forward bending
Standing + forward bending
Sitting
Standing
Table Top
Prone
Side lying
Supine

Ahimsa: applying non-harm in asana

The following may require forward bends to be practiced with caution or modification, or omitted...

- Herniated discs
- Sciatica
- Low back pain
- Sacroiliac strain
- Hamstring injury
- Reflux/hernia
- Osteoporosis
- Excessive thoracic kyphosis (rounding of the upper back)
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure / cardiac issues
- Glaucoma / detached retina

Forward Bending Asana of the Syllabus

- Apanasana (Wind Relieving Pose)
- Dandasana (Staff Pose)
- Uttanasana (Intense Stretching Pose)
- Janu Sirsasana (Head to Knee Pose)
- Paschimottanasana (Intense Stretch to the West Pose)



“Many people begin practicing hatha yoga with the belief that one elusive day, when they have touched their toes or achieved a particularly difficult posture, they will be doing ‘good’ or ‘real’ yoga. In truth, it matters little how far you can bend forward... for wherever the point of resistance lies is the place where you have the greatest opportunity to learn and change.”

~ Donna Farhi ~

Today's practice...

Warm...

- Core
- Hip flexors
- Quads

Release...

- Hamstrings
- Adductors

Awareness / observe...

- Breath initiates and leads your movement
- Axial extension (lengthen spine)
- Pelvis: degree of flexion

Sources of inspiration:

- David Coulter
- Judith Hanson Lasater
- Donna Farhi
- Mark Stephens
- Bernie Clark

Images (where not already specified):

Science of Yoga

George Watts Lesson Planner

Canva