

Exercise Spotlight: Spine Stretch Forward

Spine Stretch Forward – as the name applies – is a delicious stretch for the body! Let's look at its setup, execution and how essential it is for breathing.

In the Classical order, Spine Stretch Forward follows the Abdominal Series, and it is the first seated exercise in the order. This respiratory exercise asks us to empty our lungs fully, squeezing every atom of air from them. It is an exercise that helps to stretch the entire posterior chain, develops a better C-curve, and improves the ability to roll and articulate the spine. Traditionally, five repetitions of this exercise are performed.

The setup is a key to success with Spine Stretch Forward. Create a solid base with your legs active and mat distance or a little wider apart, with the feet flexed and heels pressing down. Perch up on your sitz bones and lift up out of the hips, creating space between the ribs and the hips (which will give you the space to articulate the spine). Extend your arms out in front of you with the palms facing downward and index fingers in line with arm pit. Center your head over your hips and gaze straight ahead.

Initiation of this exercise begins at the uppermost part of the spine. The skull nods, the eyes move downward, and you begin to articulate downward one vertebra at a time, coming into a C shape as you exhale fully. You can think of lifting up and over an imaginary ball. To return upward, start at the lower

part of the spine and pull yourself up up up, then drop the shoulders and let the head float up last.

Checkpoints:

- Set up with head over pelvis, lift out of hips.
- Move sequentially from the head downward.
- Do not allow the pelvis to shift.
- Create two-way opposition up and out of the crown of the head and down and out through the tail and down the legs to the heels.
- Return up the low, middle and upper spine, then finally lift the head.
- Keep shoulders away from ears.
- Aim for placing head close to torso curling inward.
- Do not allow legs to move in or out.

A great way to check your execution of this exercise is to set up against a wall and peel off the wall from top to bottom. Do not let your pelvis leave the wall. Pull your abs deeply back and up toward the vertical surface. As you roll back up, feel each part of your back sequentially touch the wall, and finally, feel the back of your head make contact.

If you are tight, bend your knees slightly or elevate your hips on a yoga brick or small box to allow you to set up with good spinal alignment.

You can also inject a little variety by adding props to this exercise. You might try adding a power circle underneath the palms of the hands, and as you roll down and up, press lightly into the ring to create more axial elongation. A power circle held out to the front can also help connect ribs to scapula and scapula to ribs. A ball can be used under the hands to keep the shoulders down and to guide and smooth out the spinal articulation.

We have focused a lot in this article on setup and execution, but it is important to remember that one of the goals of Spine

Stretch Forward is to empty the lungs. Joseph Pilates believed that a full strong exhalation promoted healthy inhalation. Be sure to really use the rounded position to press the air out of the lungs fully, and then allow the inhalation to help float you up.

***This article was contributed by Zoey Trap M.S.,
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