

Esther Gokhale grew up in India and studied at Harvard, Princeton, the San Francisco School of Oriental Medicine and the Aiplomb Institute in Paris. She has performed research around the world and currently writes and teaches from her E.G. Wellness Center in Palo Alto, CA. Visit www.egwellness.com



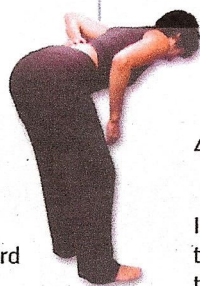
Better Body Bending

If there is one action that makes or breaks a back, it is bending. If there is one action that a mother is doing all day long, it is bending—lifting a baby, picking up toys, collecting laundry—so many important things happen below waist height!

Many people believe that the proper way to reach the floor is to bend the knees rather than the back. The problems with knee-bending are that it's not actually practical in many situations and that the knees are not designed for a lifetime of bending, especially when combined with lifting.

The key to bending well is to “hinge” from the hips. This is how native peoples manage to spend all day gathering water chestnuts or transplanting rice seedlings. In contrast, most people in our modern American culture round their backs as they bend. This style of bending has two unfortunate consequences. First, it compresses the front part of certain discs, causing wear and tear that can eventually lead to nerve damage. Second, it stretches the ligaments; repeated stretching can cause them to become lax, ultimately leading to abnormal forward curvature as in the “dowager’s hump.”

Hip-hinging not only avoids damage to the discs and ligaments of the back, but in fact strengthens key back muscles and stretches the hamstrings. Most importantly, it is easy and feels perfectly natural once you know how.



Here's how to learn hip-hinging:

1. Stand with feet about hip-width apart. Place one hand on your low back with the fingertips on your midline groove. This hand will monitor your groove as you bend. Soften your knees.
2. Start to tip your torso forward from the hip. Feel your pelvis rotate forward; your pelvis leads, and the back follows. Your fingertips should feel no change to your midline groove. If you feel the groove disappear, straighten up and try again.
3. When you can't go any further without losing your groove, bend your knees to get where you need to. (What limits your forward bend is the tightness of your hamstrings.)

As you are hinging forward, keep your knees pointed out over the feet and let the pelvis settle between the thighs. Also, keep your head, neck and shoulders just as they are when you are standing—that is, don't let them bend out of alignment.

4. When you are ready to straighten up, again, move from the hip joint, unhinging the torso as a single unit.

If you are hip-hinging correctly, when you are bent forward, your entire torso should feel solid and protected, with the arms free and available for the task at hand. Look around and you will find examples of healthy hip-hinging bending in your own household: children do it naturally!

Once you know how to bend forward correctly, learning to lift from this position is the next step. Stay tuned for correct Lifting in the next issue of Bay Area Mama! **BAM**

