

Self-care information on...

Leg cramps



What are leg cramps?

A leg cramp is an episode of sudden and severe pain in the muscles of the leg caused by an involuntary contracting (shortening) of the leg muscle. Most leg cramps occur in the calf muscles, although it can affect any part of your leg, including your feet and thighs.

Three out of four cases occur at night during sleep.

What causes leg cramps?

Leg cramps can occur for no apparent reason, known as idiopathic leg cramps, or as a symptom or complication of a health condition, known as secondary leg cramps.

Causes of secondary leg cramps can include pregnancy, exercise, dehydration and certain types of medication, such as statins (medicines that help lower cholesterol levels).

If you are otherwise well, and have no other unexplained symptoms, then the leg cramps are likely to be of unknown cause.

What are the symptoms of leg cramps?

- Tightening of affected muscles
- Pain in legs
- Stiff feet and toes

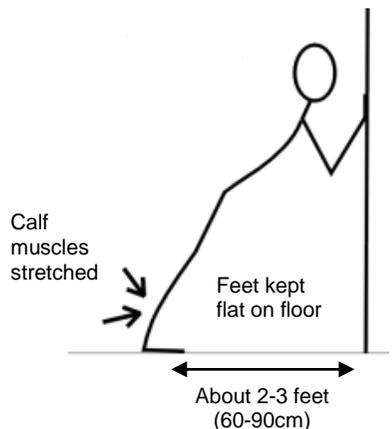
Cramps can last from a few seconds up to 10 minutes. Thigh muscle cramps tend to last the longest. After the cramps have passed, you may have pain and tenderness in your legs for several hours.

Preventing leg cramps

Stretching

If you often get leg cramps, regularly stretching the muscles in your lower legs may help prevent the cramps or reduce their frequency.

- Stand about 60-90 cm from a wall.
- Keep the soles of your feet flat on the floor and bend forward to lean on the wall. You will feel your calf muscles stretch.
- Do this several times, each time for as long as you can manage.
- Repeat three times a day, including once shortly before bedtime. If the cramps ease off, you may then only need to do the exercise once or twice a day to keep the cramps away.



It may take a week or so of exercises before you notice an improvement.

Sleeping position

- If you lie on your back, make sure that your toes point upwards – placing a pillow on its side at the end of your bed, with the soles of your feet propped up against it may help keep your feet in the right position.
- If you lie on your front, hang your feet over the end of the bed – this will keep your feet in a relaxed position and help stop the muscles in your calves from contracting and tensing.
- Keep your sheets and blankets loose at the foot of the bed to prevent toes and feet from pointing downwards during sleep.

How do you manage leg cramps?

Treat underlying cause

If you have secondary leg cramps, treating the underlying cause may help relieve your symptoms.

Exercise and stretching

Most cases of leg cramps can be relieved by exercising the affected muscles. Exercising your legs during the day will often help reduce how often you get cramping episodes (see Preventing leg cramps).

During an episode of leg cramp, stretch and massage the affected muscle.

For example, if the cramp is in your calf muscle:

- Straighten your leg and lift your foot upwards, bending it at the ankle so that your toes point towards your shin.
- Walk around on your heels for a few minutes.

Medication

Medication is usually only needed in the most severe and persistent cases where cramping does not respond to exercise.

- Painkillers

Painkillers will not work quickly enough to take during a cramp. If you have leg pain that persists after an episode of cramping, an over-the-counter painkiller, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen may help reduce the pain.

- Quinine

Quinine is not recommended for routine treatment of leg cramps. It is reserved for leg cramps that are very painful or frequent and that affect your quality of life. This is because the side effects of quinine can be very severe e.g. hearing problems, blindness and blood disorders.

Your GP will only consider prescribing quinine as a last resort and you will be regularly monitored to check that you are not experiencing side effects. Treatment will be stopped if no benefit is seen. Never take more than the prescribed dose of quinine.

When to contact your GP practice

- You think your medication may be causing your leg cramps.
- You get leg cramps frequently, or they are so painful that they disrupt your sleep and you are unable to function normally the next day.
- If the muscles in your legs are shrinking or becoming weaker.

You should seek immediate medical help if:

- The cramps last longer than 10 minutes and fail to improve, despite exercise.
- Cramps develop after you come into contact with substances that could be toxic (poisonous) or infectious, for example, if you have a cut that is contaminated with soil, which can sometimes cause a bacterial infection, such as tetanus, or after being exposed to elements such as mercury or lead.

In these circumstances, contact your GP for advice immediately. If this is not possible, contact your local out-of-hours service or call NHS Direct on 0845 4647.

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: <http://www.nhs.uk>
- Patient UK <http://www.patient.co.uk>

