



Medicine for Managers

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Cramp

Many of you will have danced inelegantly round the bedroom in the small hours trying to relieve severe pain and spasm in a leg, whilst desperately attempting to avoid disturbing a spouse or partner. Nearly everyone gets cramp at some time. Not only are they common but they are normal, involving part or all of a muscle or several muscles in a group. They can occur anywhere in the body.

C ramp occurs when a muscle suddenly and uncontrollably contracts in a painful spasm. The spasms may last from a few seconds to a few minutes .

Commonly such spasms affect the legs (with the calves most often affected) or the back, but they may be felt in the arms, neck, chest or abdomen.

Cramp affecting the muscles of the thigh tend to last the longest. The symptom may develop during exercise, when walking or suddenly in the middle of the night. The muscle feels hard during an episode.

People who are most likely to get muscle cramps include:

- Athletes
- Pregnant women
- People over the age of 65
- People who are obese.

Cramps are overwhelmingly nothing to worry about and the actual cause is unknown.

Doctors therefore use the word 'idiopathic' to describe it.

Suggestions for the cause include the result of some sort of unusual nerve activity or reduction in the blood supply but there is no good evidence to support either theory.

There are, however, a number of factors which may predispose to the development of symptoms.

- Inadequate muscle stretching
- Muscle fatigue
- Dehydration
- Stress
- Too much vigorous exercise
- Disturbances in blood chemistry such as too much or too little sodium or potassium

Specifically, nocturnal leg cramps may be caused by sitting for too long, overusing the muscles, standing or working on hard floors or sitting improperly.

It is estimated that 40% of patients over 60 get cramp and 40% of them have cramp more than twice a week.

It is thought that, in older people, the increased frequency is associated with shortening of the tendons which is a natural age change.

Overall, three out of four people have cramp only at night and one in fifteen has it only during the day.

About one third of pregnant women are also affected. It may also be that some medications may increase cramp including statins, used to treat raised cholesterol, diuretics or nifedipine, used to treat raised blood pressure or angina.

Clearly, treatment of cramp in that group of individuals in who there is an identifiable cause is by managing the cause in question. However, as there is no clearly apparent cause for most people, there are some measures which might be worth trying to reduce the risk.

- Try to exercise regularly
- Improve fitness and, if obese, lose weight
- Stretch those muscles prone to spasm regularly

- Keep hydrated
- Avoid exercise in extreme heat
- Avoid medication identified as a cause of symptoms
- If leg cramps are the symptom, stretch the muscles before going to sleep, using exercises involving pointing the toes upwards and keeping only the heel on the ground

Sometimes medications may be used to assist reduction of pain and frequency of cramps. However, they are not a quick-fix solution.

They include:

- Simple over-the-counter remedies such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.
- Occasionally, quinine can be prescribed in the treatment of cramp. Originally used to treat malaria, it may not always be recommended because it does have side-effects
- Muscle relaxants may be prescribed, including diltiazem and gabapentin if the cramp is chronic or severe
- Vitamin B complex and magnesium supplements may help particularly with leg cramps but more definitive research is required.

Clearly the use of any medication will depend on the frequency of the episodes, whether exercising has failed and to what extent the cramps affect sleep or quality of life.

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