



# Muscle Cramps

## Condition Basics

### What are muscle cramps?

A muscle cramp is a strong, painful contraction or tightening of a muscle that comes on suddenly and lasts from a few seconds to several minutes. It often occurs in the legs. A muscle cramp is also called a charley horse.

[Nighttime leg cramps](#) are usually sudden spasms, or tightening, of muscles in the calf. The muscle cramps can sometimes happen in the thigh or the foot. They often occur just as you are falling asleep or waking up.

### What causes them?

The cause of muscle cramps isn't always known. Muscle cramps may be brought on by many conditions or activities, such as:

- Exercising, injury, or overuse of muscles.
- Pregnancy. Cramps may occur because of decreased amounts of minerals, such as calcium and magnesium, especially in the later months of pregnancy.
- Exposure to cold temperatures, especially to cold water.
- Other medical conditions, such as blood flow problems (peripheral arterial disease), kidney disease, thyroid disease, and multiple sclerosis.
- Standing on a hard surface for a long time, sitting for a long time, or putting your legs in awkward positions while you sleep.
- Not having enough potassium, calcium, and other minerals in your blood.

- Being dehydrated, which means that your body has lost too much fluid.
- Taking certain medicines, such as antipsychotics, birth control pills, diuretics, and steroids.

## **How are muscle cramps treated?**

If cramps keep coming back, bother you a lot, or interfere with your sleep, your doctor may prescribe medicine that relaxes your muscles.

Talk with your doctor if you have muscle cramps that keep coming back or are severe. These may be symptoms of another problem, such as restless legs syndrome.

## **How can you care for yourself?**

You may need to try several different ways to stop a muscle cramp before you find what works best for you. Here are some things you can try:

- Stretch and massage the muscle.
- Take a warm shower or bath to relax the muscle. A heating pad placed on the muscle can also help.
- Try using an ice or cold pack. Always keep a cloth between your skin and the ice pack.
- Take an over-the-counter pain medicine, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve). Be safe with medicines. Read and follow all instructions on the label.
- If your doctor prescribes medicines for muscle cramps, take them exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you have any problems with your medicine.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Sports drinks, such as Gatorade, will often help leg cramps.

Here are some things you can try for a leg cramp:

- Walk around, or jiggle your leg.
- Stretch your calf muscles. You can do this stretch while you sit or stand:

- While sitting, straighten your leg and flex your foot up toward your knee. It may help to place a rolled towel under the ball of your foot and, while holding the towel at both ends, gently pull the towel toward you while keeping your knee straight.
- While standing about 0.5 m (2 ft) from a wall, lean forward against the wall (Figure 1). Keep the knee of the affected leg straight and the heel on the ground. Do this while you bend the knee of the other leg.

If you think a medicine is causing muscle cramps:

- Before you take another dose, call the doctor who prescribed the medicine. The medicine may need to be stopped or changed, or the dose may need to be adjusted.
- If you are taking any medicine not prescribed by a doctor, stop taking it. Talk to your doctor if you think you need to continue taking the medicine.

## **How can you prevent them?**

These tips may help prevent muscle cramps:

- Drink plenty of water and other fluids.
- Limit or avoid drinks with alcohol.
- Make sure you are eating healthy foods (especially if you are pregnant) that are rich in calcium, potassium, and magnesium.
- Ride a bike or stationary bike to condition and stretch your muscles.
- Stretch (Figure 2) your muscles every day, especially before and after exercise and at bedtime.
- Don't suddenly increase the amount of exercise you get. Increase your exercise a little each week.
- Take a daily multivitamin supplement.

If you are taking medicines that are known to cause leg cramps, your doctor may prescribe different medicines.

## **Figure 1 - Calf Stretch**



This exercise stretches the muscles at the back of the lower leg (the calf) and the Achilles tendon. Do this exercise 3 or 4 times a day, 5 days a week. To do this stretch:

- Stand facing a wall with your hands on the wall at about eye level. Put the leg you want to stretch about a step behind your other leg.
- Keeping your back heel on the floor, bend your front knee until you feel a stretch in the back leg.
- Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 2 to 4 times.

Repeat the exercise with the back knee bent a little, still keeping your back heel on the floor. This will stretch a different part of the calf muscles.

Talk with your doctor or physiotherapist if you have questions about how to do this or any other exercise.

## **Figure 2 - Stretches**

Do all stretches gradually. Do not push or bounce the stretch. You should feel a stretch, not pain.

Breathe normally as you stretch. Do not hold your breath. If you like to time your breathing with your exercise, you can breathe out as you stretch, breathe normally in and out 2 or 3 times as you hold the stretch, and then relax. This will mean each stretch takes 15 to 30 seconds.

## Latissimus stretch



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1. Stand with your back straight and your feet shoulder-width apart. You can do this stretch sitting down if you are not steady on your feet.
2. Hold your arms above your head, and hold one hand with the other.
3. Pull upward while leaning straight over toward your right side. Keep your lower body straight. You should feel the stretch along your left side.
4. Hold 15 to 30 seconds, then switch sides.
5. Repeat 2 to 4 times for each side.

## Triceps stretch



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1. Stand with your back straight and your feet shoulder-width apart. You can do this stretch sitting down if you are not steady on your feet.
2. Bring your left elbow straight up while bending your arm.
3. Grab your left elbow with your right hand, and pull your left elbow toward your head with light pressure. If you are more flexible, you may pull your arm slightly behind your head. You will feel the stretch along the back of your arm.
4. Hold 15 to 30 seconds, then switch elbows.
5. Repeat 2 to 4 times for each arm.

## **Calf stretch**

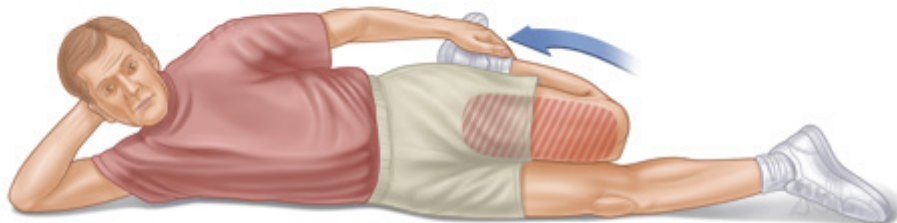


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1. Place your hands on a wall for balance. You can also do this with your hands on the back of a chair, a countertop, or a tree.
2. Step back with your left leg. Keep the leg straight, and press your left heel into the floor.
3. Press your hips forward, bending your right leg slightly. You will feel the stretch in your left calf.
4. Hold the stretch 15 to 30 seconds.
5. Repeat 2 to 4 times for each leg.

## Quadriceps stretch



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1. Lie on your side with one hand supporting your head.
2. Stretch your leg back by pulling your foot toward your buttock.  
You will feel the stretch in the front of your thigh. If this causes stress on your knees, do not do this stretch.
3. Hold the stretch 15 to 30 seconds.
4. Repeat 2 to 4 times for each leg.

## Groin stretch



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1. Sit on the floor and put the soles of your feet together.
2. Grab your ankles and gently pull your legs toward you.
3. Use your elbows to press your knees toward the floor. You will feel the stretch in your inner thighs.
4. Hold 15 to 30 seconds.
5. Repeat 2 to 4 times.

## Hamstring stretch





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1. Lie on the floor. Extend your left leg out straight with your toes pointing up. If your back is uncomfortable, use a rolled face cloth or small towel for support.
2. Bend your right knee. Gently pull your right leg toward you as you straighten that knee. You should feel a gentle stretch down the back of your right leg.
3. Hold the stretch 15 to 30 seconds.
4. Repeat 2 to 4 times for each leg.

### Related Information

- [Restless Legs Syndrome](#)

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