

Cramp

What is cramp?

Cramp is a painful spasm in the muscle, usually the calf muscles of the leg. It can also occur in the foot. The affected muscle feels hard and tense, and it is almost impossible to control it.

Who gets cramp?

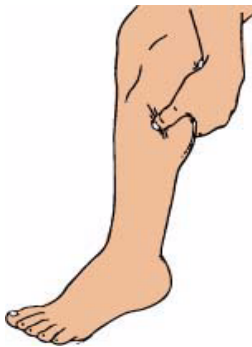
Cramp happens from time to time in almost everyone, but some are more prone than others to regular cramps. Pregnant women are prone to cramps. They are common in athletes and footballers, especially after long periods of intense running. They are also common after unaccustomed exercise. Many people, especially the elderly, are often roused during sleep by sudden and severe cramps in the calves.

What is the cause?

There is usually no underlying cause other than unaccustomed exercise. It is thought that a type of natural acid substance builds up in the muscles and initiates the cramp. It can also be caused by a prolonged period of sitting, standing or lying in an uncomfortable position. Uncommon causes are more serious medical conditions such as hardening of the leg arteries, thyroid troubles, lack of salt (sodium chloride) in the cells and various drugs.

What is the treatment?

The usual cramp lasts no longer than a minute or so and will usually clear up of its own accord. It can be eased by firmly massaging the affected muscle and flexing the foot back towards you. It is easier if you can get someone to do this for you. Some people claim that they can quickly terminate their cramps by applying firm finger pressure in the webbing between the first and second toes.



Massage the affected muscle

How can night-time cramps be prevented?

Medication

Doctors often prescribe quinine sulphate tablets to take before retiring, but it may be worth trying a glass of tonic water instead.

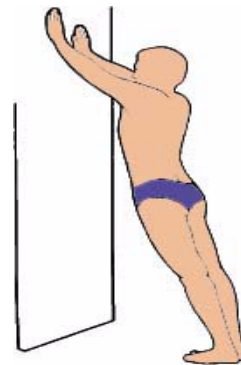
Pillows at the foot of the bed

It is worth trying to keep the bedclothes off the feet and placing a doubled up pillow under the sheet at the foot of the bed so that the feet are kept bent back towards you during sleep. Some people find that raising the foot of the bed about 10 centimetres helps prevent cramps.

Exercises

Certain muscle stretching and relaxation exercises help prevent cramps.

Exercise 1: Stand barefoot about 1 metre from a wall, lean forward with the back straight and your outstretched hands against the wall (as in the diagram). Lift your heels off the floor and then force them into the floor to produce tension in the calf muscles. Hold this position for 20 seconds and repeat about 5 times. Do this exercise 2-3 times a day for a week and then each night before retiring.



Exercise 2: This usually follows exercise 1 before retiring. Rest in a chair with your feet and legs horizontal and with support under your Achilles tendon. Keep this position for 10 minutes.