
SELF-CARE INFORMATION ON LEG CRAMPS

A leg cramp is an episode of sudden and severe pain in the muscles of the leg caused by an involuntary contraction (shortening) of the muscle. Most leg cramps occur in the calf muscles, although they can affect any part of the leg, including the 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 (idiopathic leg cramps) or as a symptom of an underlying health condition (secondary leg cramps).

Causes of secondary leg cramps include:

- **Pregnancy**
- **Exercise** (especially strenuous activity or prolonged standing)
- **Dehydration**
- **Electrolyte imbalances** (low levels of potassium, calcium, or magnesium)
- **Certain medications** such as statins (used to lower cholesterol) and diuretics (used for high blood pressure)
- **Prolonged inactivity** (e.g., sitting for long periods or poor circulation)
- **Nerve-related conditions** such as peripheral neuropathy

If you are otherwise well and have no other unexplained symptoms, then your leg cramps are likely to be idiopathic.

What are the symptoms of leg cramps?

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

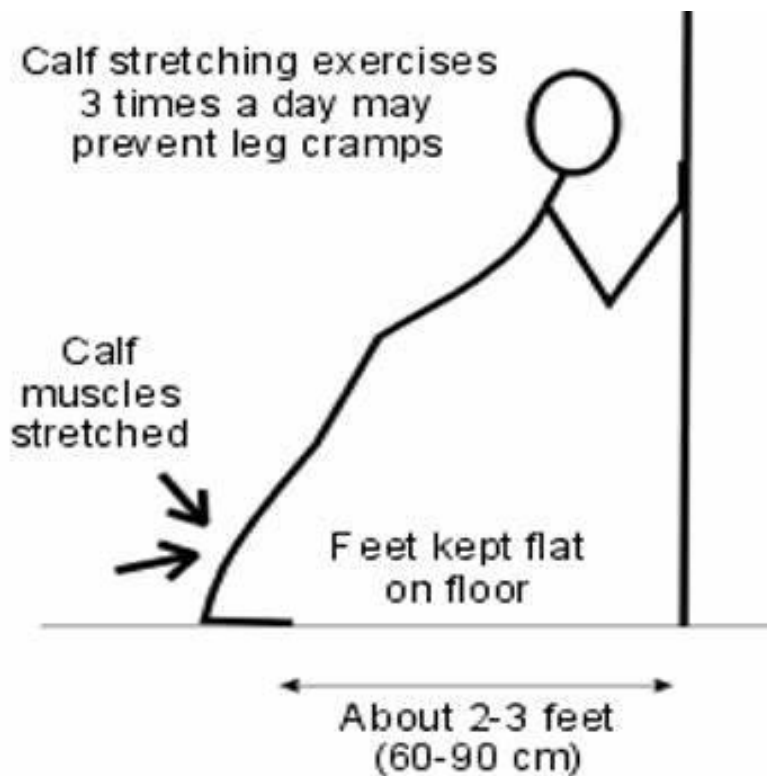
Cramps can last from a few seconds up to 10 minutes. Thigh muscle cramps tend to last the longest. After the cramps have passed, you may have pain and tenderness in your legs for several hours.

Preventing leg cramps

1. Stretching

If you frequently experience leg cramps, regularly stretching your lower leg muscles may help prevent them or reduce their frequency.

- Stand about 60-90 cm from a wall.
- Keep the soles of your feet flat on the floor and lean forward to rest your hands on the wall, feeling the stretch in your calf muscles.
- Hold for as long as comfortable and repeat several times.
- Do this **three times a day**, including once before bedtime. If the cramps improve, you may reduce this to **once or twice a day** for maintenance.
- **It may take a week or more before you notice improvement.**



2. Hydration and Nutrition

- Drink plenty of water throughout the day to **prevent dehydration**.
- Ensure a balanced intake of **electrolytes** such as **potassium, calcium, and magnesium**, found in bananas, dairy, leafy greens, nuts, and whole grains.

3. Sleeping Position

- If you sleep on your back, ensure that your toes point **upwards**. Placing a pillow on its side at the foot of your bed with the soles of your feet propped against it can help.
- If you sleep on your front, let your feet **hang over the edge** of the bed to keep your muscles relaxed.
- Keep your sheets and blankets **loose at the foot of the bed** to prevent your toes and feet from pointing downward during sleep.

How do you manage leg cramps?

1. Treat any underlying condition

If your leg cramps are secondary to another condition, treating the cause may help relieve symptoms. Speak to your GP if you suspect an underlying health issue.

2. Stretching and Massage

Most leg cramps can be relieved by gently **stretching and massaging** the affected muscle. During a cramping episode, try the following:

- 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 toward your shin.
 - **Walk around on your heels** for a few minutes to help relax the muscle.
 - **Massage or apply heat** (e.g., a warm towel or heating pad) to the affected area.

3. Medication

- **Painkillers:** Over-the-counter painkillers such as **paracetamol or ibuprofen** may help reduce muscle tenderness after a cramp, but they **do not work quickly enough** to relieve a cramp while it is happening.
- **Quinine** is **not routinely recommended** due to the risk of severe side effects (such as hearing loss, vision problems, and blood disorders). It is only prescribed in very severe cases when cramps significantly affect quality of life, and regular monitoring is required. If no benefit is seen, treatment is discontinued. **Never take more than the prescribed dose of quinine.**

When to contact your GP

See your GP if:

- You suspect your **medication** may be causing your leg cramps.
- You experience **frequent and severe cramps** that disrupt your sleep or affect your daily activities.
- You notice your **leg muscles are shrinking or becoming weaker.**

Seek immediate medical help if:

- The cramps ***last longer than 10 minutes*** and do not improve despite stretching and exercise.
- You develop cramps after ***exposure to toxic substances*** (e.g., contaminated soil, which may lead to tetanus, or heavy metals like lead or mercury).
- The cramps are accompanied by ***swelling, redness, warmth, or tenderness***, which could indicate a more serious condition such as ***deep vein thrombosis (DVT)***.
- You experience ***numbness, tingling, or weakness*** in your legs, which may suggest a neurological cause.

In these cases, contact your ***GP immediately***. If this is not possible, call ***NHS 111*** for urgent advice. In an emergency, call ***999***.

Useful contacts

- Ask your pharmacist for advice on managing cramps.
- Patient UK - www.patient.co.uk
- NHS Choices, www.nhs.uk/conditions/

If you have further questions:

- *Fill out a **triage form** on our website or call the practice on 01285 653184 or 01285 653122*
- If you require ***urgent*** medical advice, call 111 (24 hours)
- ***In an emergency call 999***