

Patient information from BMJ

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Leg cramps: what are they?

Leg cramps are not usually serious and you might not need treatment. But if your leg cramps are troublesome and stop you sleeping, there are treatments that you can try.

What are leg cramps?

People who get a leg cramp feel a sudden pain in one or both legs, often at night.

This happens when a muscle or group of muscles suddenly tightens (contracts). This is called a muscle spasm. Most cramps happen in calf muscles, but you can also get cramps in your thigh or in your foot.

Leg cramps usually happen at night or when you are resting. The muscle contractions can last for a few seconds or up to 10 minutes.

What else can cause leg pain?

Cramps aren't the only cause of leg pain. You can also get severe calf pain after an injury, or if you have a Baker's cyst that bursts (a Baker's cyst is a lump of fluid that forms behind the knee).

If you have leg pain that is severe, lasts more than 10 minutes, and is accompanied by redness, swelling, and fever, you should seek medical help immediately. It could be a sign of something more serious.

Why do I get leg cramps?

We don't know very much about what causes leg cramps or why certain people get them. Most people who have these pains in their legs are not ill. But some things can make you more likely to get painful cramps, including:

- being pregnant
- being aged 60 or older
- doing vigorous exercise

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- having dialysis (this is when a machine is used to clean your blood because your kidneys aren't working properly)
- having an imbalance of some salts and minerals in your body (this is called an electrolyte imbalance)
- having problems with your blood circulation or having varicose veins in your legs (varicose veins happen when valves in veins don't work properly, so that blood pools in the veins)
- having damaged nerves or a disease that affects your nerves, such as motor neuron disease
- having a disease that affects your muscles, such as multiple sclerosis
- having diabetes (leg cramps can happen if your blood sugar gets too low, which is called a hypoglycaemic episode, or 'hypo').

Some medicines can cause leg cramps as a side effect. They include:

- diuretics
- nifedipine
- beta-agonists
- corticosteroids (often just called steroids)
- morphine
- cimetidine
- penicillamine
- statins
- lithium.

What are the symptoms of leg cramps?

Leg cramps often happen at night. You'll probably feel a sharp pain that might wake you from your sleep. This happens most often in the calf muscle.

Here are some of the signs of a leg cramp:

- The main symptom is pain that comes on suddenly
- You will probably feel your calf muscle hardening
- The pain from the muscle tightening (contracting) can last for just a few seconds or up to 10 minutes
- Your muscle might be sore for up to 24 hours afterwards
- Only one leg is usually affected.

What will happen to me?

Leg cramps can be annoying or can disturb your sleep. But they aren't likely to cause any serious problems. They usually go away quite suddenly on their own.

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You can be in a lot of pain and keep waking up at night because of sudden muscle spasms in a part of your leg, probably your calf. And you might get cramps for several weeks. But most people find their leg cramps suddenly go away.

If you get leg cramps while you're pregnant you'll probably find that they are more troublesome later in pregnancy, especially at night. But you'll probably stop having leg cramps as soon as you've had your baby.

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