

How to Get Rid of Leg Cramps

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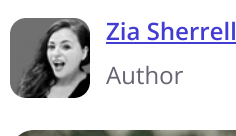


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Have you ever been rudely awakened from a peaceful sleep by severe leg cramps? If so, you'll know how painful these involuntary muscle contractions can be. Your muscles may feel tight like a knot, and the area may hurt for hours afterward.

Muscle cramps are common. Often, they're associated with exercise, but around [1 in 4 people experience nocturnal leg cramps](#), and the number increases to 1 in 2 older adults.

Although these muscular spasms are uncomfortable and frustrating, especially if they interfere with healthy sleep patterns, they're not usually a cause for concern.

Fortunately, there are several things you can do to relieve the pain and prevent future cramps.

What are leg cramps?

A leg cramp is an involuntary, often painful contraction of a muscle or group of muscles in the leg. The muscle tenses up and feels tight and painful. **The sensation can last anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes.**

Cramps usually affect the calves, thighs, or feet but can also occur in other places in the body, such as the muscles of the hands, arms, stomach, and back.

Though typically harmless, muscle cramps can temporarily disable the affected muscle and cause a dull pain that remains after the cramp subsides. They can also make it difficult to fall asleep or disrupt sleep, leaving you tired and fatigued the next day.

In some cases, cramps may indicate an underlying medical condition.

Causes of leg cramps

Sometimes, the causes of leg cramps are unknown. However, [research](#) suggests that the main cause is muscle fatigue. **Exercise-associated muscle cramps are the most common condition** requiring medical intervention during sports. If you've been exercising hard or for an extended period, you may experience leg cramps later.

In contrast, **a lack of exercise is also a risk factor.** A sedentary lifestyle with [prolonged sitting may cause](#) muscles to shorten over time as they are not stretched with physical activity. Sitting in a certain way, such as with the legs crossed, may also restrict blood flow to the legs, leading to cramps.

Other risk factors include being older, possibly due to a more [sedentary lifestyle](#), or being pregnant. There may be an [association between pregnancy and leg cramps at night](#), possibly due to increased nutritional demands or hormonal changes.

The role of dehydration in leg cramps isn't certain. Several studies report that [dehydration doesn't cause muscle cramps](#). Instead, it may be that electrolyte imbalance is more likely a cause. It's possible that increasing water intake after dehydration dilutes sodium and other electrolytes in the blood, causing cramps.

Medications

If you're experiencing muscle cramps, check any medications you're taking, as [some are associated with cramps](#), including:

- Clonazepam
- Gabapentin
- Naproxen
- Pregabalin
- Statins
- Zolpidem

Health conditions

Living with a chronic medical condition may also increase your risk of [chronic leg cramps](#). These conditions include:

- Alcohol use disorder
- ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis/Lou Gehrig's disease)
- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Hypothyroidism
- Kidney failure
- Liver failure
- Nerve damage and disorders
- Osteoarthritis

How can I get rid of leg cramps?

Because leg cramps are so painful, you'll want to relieve them as soon as possible. Although it might not always be possible to ease the pain, some steps may help:

- **Stretch.** Gently stretch the affected muscle. You can do so by moving your foot up and down or side to side. Try to straighten the leg and then flex it by pulling the toes towards the shin. Don't point your toes, as this could make the cramp worse.
- **Massage.** Use your fingers and hands to rub the cramped muscle and help the blood flow.
- **Stand.** Get up and place your weight on the affected leg, straightening the knee. This stretches the muscle and may ease the discomfort.
- **Walk.** If you're able, take a few steps and wiggle your leg as you walk.
- **Apply heat.** Place a warm, damp towel, heating pad, or hot water bottle on the cramped muscle. Alternatively, take a warm bath or shower.
- **Apply cold.** Apply ice or an ice pack wrapped in a towel to the affected muscle.
- **Pain relieving medication.** Take an over-the-counter pain medication such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen if you're extremely uncomfortable.
- **Elevate.** As the pain begins to subside, prop your leg up on a pillow to further ease your discomfort.

Preventing leg cramps

It's not always possible to prevent leg cramps, but these tips may help:

- **Exercise.** Some people find that regular exercise such as walking, or cycling helps them experience fewer leg cramps.
- **Hydrate.** Drinking enough water is essential for overall health. Also, fluids help transport nutrients to the muscles and remove waste. Therefore, drinking plenty of fluids throughout the day may help optimize muscle function.
- **Change shoes.** You may experience less cramping if you wear more supportive shoes.

When should I see a doctor about leg cramps?

If leg cramps become more than an occasional issue or are so severe that it's difficult to walk or stand, it's best to see your doctor for a diagnosis.

Your doctor will likely ask about your medical history, medications, and any recent changes in your activity level. They may also ask about your diet and whether you consume enough fluids each day.

If a leg cramp lasts longer than 10 minutes or is unbearably painful, seek emergency medical attention. Also, if it happens after touching substances, that could be poisonous or infectious.

Occasional leg cramps are normal and not usually a cause for concern. They may occur with exercise or after sitting for long periods. They may also increase as people get older or during pregnancy.

Often, gentle stretching and massaging of the muscle is enough to ease the pain from cramps.

However, if you're experiencing regular leg cramps, or the cramp lasts for a prolonged period, you should see your doctor. Sometimes, leg cramps are a sign of an underlying health disorder that your doctor can diagnose and treat.

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