

# Leg Cramps

Leg cramps are common. Some medicines and some medical conditions sometimes cause leg cramps. However, the cause is not known in most cases. Regular calf stretching exercises may prevent leg cramps. Quinine tablets may be advised if you have leg cramps regularly.

## What are leg cramps?

A leg cramp is a pain that comes from a muscle in the leg. It is due to a muscle spasm which is when a muscle contracts too hard. It usually occurs in one of the calf muscles, below and behind a knee. The small muscles of the feet are sometimes affected.

The cramp pain typically lasts a few minutes. It may last up to 10 minutes in some cases. The severity of the pain varies. The muscle may remain tender for up to 24 hours after a leg cramp. Leg cramps usually occur when you are resting - most commonly at night. (They are often called night cramps.) They may wake you from sleep. It can become a distressing condition if your sleep is regularly disturbed.

## Who gets leg cramps?

Many people have an occasional leg cramp. However, they occur frequently in some people. They are more common in older people.

About 1 in 3 people over the age of 60, and about half of people over 80 have regular leg cramps. About 4 in 10 people who have leg cramps have at least 3 per week. They occur every day in some cases.

## What causes leg cramps?

In most cases, it is not known why leg cramps occur. In some people the following causes may be relevant.

- Some medicines can cause leg cramps, or make them occur more often. These include: diuretics ('water tablets'), nifedipine, cimetidine, salbutamol, terbutaline, lithium, clofibrate, penicillamine, and morphine.
- Some people who have renal (kidney) dialysis get leg cramps.
- Pregnancy - usually in the later stages.
- An untreated under-active thyroid gland.
- Peripheral vascular disease (narrowing of the arteries in the legs which causes poor circulation)

- Cirrhosis of the liver is a rare cause.
- Smoking can affect the circulation, which may make leg cramps more likely.
- Alcohol may be a factor in some people.

## What are the treatments for leg cramps?

### Consider your medication (where appropriate)

Tell your doctor if you take any of the medicines listed above. It may be causing the leg cramps, or making them recur more often. Alternative medicines may be available.

### Stretching exercises

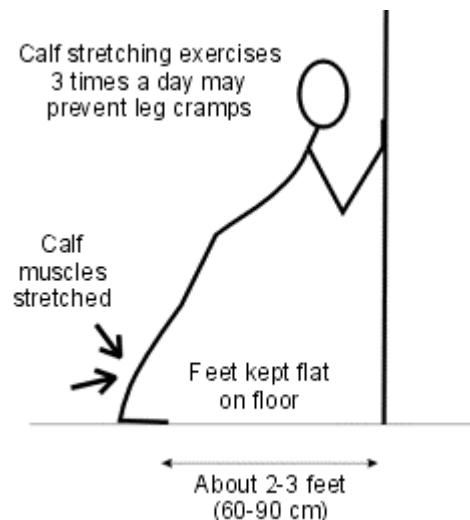
Massage, walking, and stretching the affected muscle (usually the calf muscle) relieves a cramp attack.

In addition, you may be able to **prevent** leg cramps by doing stretching exercises every day.

If possible, you should try stretching exercises as the first treatment. If it works, you will not need any tablets to prevent the leg cramps.

If possible, you should do stretching exercises for about 5 minutes, three times a day, every day. Do the last exercise in the evening, shortly before bedtime.

One way of stretching the calf muscles is to stand about 2-3 feet (60-90 cm) away from a wall. Then, keeping the soles of your feet flat on the floor, bend forward and lean on the wall. You will feel your calf muscles stretch. Do this several times, each time for as long as you can manage.



### Elevation

Raising the head of the bed by a few centimeters and sleeping on a slight incline is said to help in some cases. It may work by improving the circulation to the legs, but it is not a proven treatment. It may be worth a try.

### Quinine

Quinine tablets are the usual treatment if the above treatments are not possible, or do not help. One tablet at bedtime is the normal dose. Quinine often reduces the number of leg cramps, but may not stop them altogether. A four-week course is commonly tried at first. A regular bedtime dose can be continued if the number of leg cramps is reduced. It may be worth stopping the quinine tablets every 3 months or so to see if they are still needed.

Most people can take quinine, but do not take it if you are pregnant or may become pregnant. There are also some rare conditions where you should not take quinine. (These include: a previous reaction to quinine; a previous hemolytic anemia; optic neuritis; glucose 6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency.) Side effects are uncommon at the low dose used to treat leg cramps. Read the packet leaflet for a full list of possible side effects.

Quinine is dangerous in overdose, particularly in children. Keep tablets away from children.

### Other treatments

Other medicines have been suggested as possible treatments for leg cramps. These include:

naftidrofuryl, vitamin E, verapamil, diltiazem, painkillers, aspirin, magnesium, calcium, and sodium chloride. TENS machines have also been suggested as a possible treatment. So far there is little evidence that these treatments work well. Your doctor may suggest trying one if all else fails.