



A Patient's Guide to Understanding Nocturnal Leg Cramps

Chances are that at one time or another, you have felt a sudden, painful cramp in your leg. This is sometimes called a muscle knot, or a “charley horse.” If you’ve experienced this, you’re not alone—leg cramps are common, and about 70% of people over age 50 get them. Medically, they are called *nocturnal leg cramps*.

What Are Nocturnal Leg Cramps?

Nocturnal leg cramps are usually felt in the calf muscles or the soles of the feet, and can last anywhere from a few seconds to as long as 10 minutes. Leg cramps can vary greatly—they can be mild or more serious, and can occur once in a while, or even every day. If your leg cramps are more serious, your quality of life can be affected. Since these cramps usually occur at night, they can make it difficult to sleep and cause you to be tired during the day.

Are You at Risk for Nocturnal Leg Cramps?

Although the exact cause of nocturnal leg cramps is not known and many people of all ages and from all walks of life experience them, some people are more likely than others to get them. In fact, nocturnal leg cramps occur most often in women and older people.

Pregnant women and people who are on *hemodialysis*, a medical treatment for end-stage liver disease, also experience leg cramps more than others. Some diseases and conditions can also cause leg cramps, including *peripheral vascular disease (PVD)*, *arthritis*, *diabetes*, *Parkinson’s disease*, disorders of the thyroid (one of the body’s glands) or nerves, and low levels of *calcium*, *potassium*, or *magnesium* in the blood.

Heavy exercise, dehydration, flat feet, and standing or sitting for long periods of time can also cause leg cramps in some people.

Talk With Your Healthcare Provider About Your Symptoms



If your nocturnal leg cramps are severe, talk with your healthcare provider—he or she may be able to recommend lifestyle changes and/or medication that can help. Make sure to tell your healthcare provider about all of your symptoms, as well as any other medical conditions that you may have. (Sometimes, treating these other conditions, or changing a medication that you are currently taking, can help to lessen cramps, or even make them go away.) This information will help your healthcare provider to rule out other conditions that have symptoms that are similar to those of nocturnal leg cramps, such as *restless legs syndrome* or muscle strain.

REFERENCES:

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All websites accessed September 7, 2007.

Stop Nocturnal Leg Cramps Before They Start

Try these tips to prevent leg cramps.

During the day...

- ◆ Drink plenty of water—six to eight glasses each day is ideal
- ◆ Stretch at least twice a day
- ◆ Rub or massage the areas that are usually affected
- ◆ Wear supportive shoes
- ◆ Swim or do water exercises

At night...

- ◆ Avoid alcohol and caffeine
- ◆ Ride a stationary bike before bed
- ◆ Elevate the head of your bed
- ◆ Prop your feet up on pillows
- ◆ Make sure that sheets and blankets are loose to prevent your toes and feet from pointing down in bed, which can cause cramps while sleeping

What to Do If You Get a Cramp

You’ve tried everything, but you’re still getting cramps—what should you do?

- ◆ Walk on or shake the leg, and then elevate it
- ◆ Straighten the leg, flex the foot, and pull the toes toward the knee
- ◆ Take a warm bath or shower; an ice pack may also help

For more information: Talk to your healthcare provider or visit www.LegDisorders.org

