

Orthopaedic Connection

Leg Cramps

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Is there anyone out there who has never had a cramp in their leg? If the answer is you haven't, you are lucky and you will sooner or later.

What Is It?

A sudden sharp spasm occurs in one leg, thigh or calf. It very rarely can occur in both legs at once. Leg cramps are extremely variable. It can awaken you from sleep and subside only after several minutes of walking.

A cramp can come on after sitting and then moving in an awkward way.

Players often limp off the field or court with a leg cramp to be attended by the athletic trainer after overexertion.

Mostly Harmless

For as painful as they are, they are harmless. They happen at completely random times. Once they leave, the leg may feel slightly or mildly sore for a short time.

Serious Causes

Pain in our legs can be from serious causes too. There are neurological and circulation problems that I always check for when someone comes to me complaining of leg cramps.

If the cramps are persistent, I always take this seriously and check things out.

ECS, What's That?

Exertional Compartment Syndrome is caused by prolonged running or other overtraining. This leads to excessive blood flow in the legs and causes calf muscles to expand. Distance runners can get this. Pain occurs in one or more of the muscle compartments.

As you increase activity aching or sharp pain comes on in the lower leg often in front. The pain comes on during exercise and gradually subsides over 30 minutes afterwards. It is difficult to diagnose ECS unless it is during or shortly after exercise.

The initial treatment is to stop or reduce intensity of training to give the muscles a chance to heal.

Wrap Up

Most of us will never have Exertional Compartment Syndrome. Most of us will at some point have leg cramps to one degree or another. If the cramps occur at night or after moving in an awkward way and they are not too frequent I usually don't get into a big workup.

Various medical treatments of night time muscle cramps have never been shown to be all that effective in preventing cramps since the onset of the cramps is so unpredictable.

But on the other hand if one or both legs are cramping and/or painful after walking, I have to check that out for circulation or neurological causes. Serious problems can be present that need to be evaluated and treated.

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Dr. Haverbush