

Orthopaedic Connection

Leg Cramps at Night

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Night leg cramps usually involve the calf, almost always on one side at a time. Cramps can also at other times affect the feet or even the thighs.

Once the cramp takes over it is almost impossible to overcome it by staying in bed. The patient scrambles out of bed quickly and begins to walk around as best they can.

Numbness is as a rule not a part of nocturnal leg cramps. Post cramp muscle weakness is rarely present.

Cause?

Pinpointing the cause is very difficult because the episodes are so variable. They may appear two nights out of three and disappear for a few months.

Some causes can be –

Dehydration

Not enough potassium, calcium and magnesium in the diet

Taking diuretics

Taking beta blockers and other blood pressure drugs

Hypothyroid

Diabetes

Cancer

Restless Legs

Night leg cramps are not the same condition as restless leg syndrome. The almost uncontrollable movement of the legs usually does occur primarily at night. However, the intense transient muscle pain that occurs with night leg cramps is hardly ever a part of restless legs syndrome.

What To Do

If you are able to, walking is the best way to get the muscle to relax.

If you are afraid to or unable to walk safely try holding on to something solid and slightly bending the knee.

If you are in too much pain to stand you will need to at least try to exercise your foot pulling it up toward your head.

If you are lucky and someone can help you, gentle massage of the cramped muscle will help it relax.

Applying heat works lots better than cold for most patients. A heating pad or moist warm towel can reduce pain and spasm.

Prevention Treatment

1. Persons who stay hydrated by drinking water and fluids throughout the day is perhaps the best thing you can do. The only drawback is you will probably be up at night a time or two going to the bathroom.
2. Stretching leg muscles before you go to bed can be helpful to reduce cramps.
3. If you have an exercise bike, ride it for 5 minutes before bed.

4. Some people who have studied cramping at night feel that wearing shoes that provide good support is important in prevention. I am often surprised that patients wear foot wear that does not give good support at all. This of course causes other health problems in the feet and lower legs also.
5. Medication. I have never felt medication is the answer because the onset of cramps can be so variable that you can't take the medication every night to prevent cramps and once the cramp starts it will subside before the medication you took becomes effective in most cases.

So – staying well hydrated and stretching before bed seem to be the best you can do to reduce night cramps.

My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website.

I sincerely appreciate all of you loyal readers and patients present and future and welcome all newcomers!

Besides what you read today there is a huge treasure trove of Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal information at www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It contains the Website Library, Your Orthopaedic Connection and complete archive of every GCH article I have written.

I specialize in you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush