

Night Cramp is something from which a great many people occasionally suffer - and they don't easily forget it. Even the healthiest people may get a short, sharp pain in the legs after a strenuous day. Many older people can bring it on by making powerful stretching movements while lying down in bed. If this sort of night cramp becomes a real nuisance, avoiding over-stretching and tablets containing quinine sulphate at bed-time may be all that is needed.

A very small number of patients, however, cannot take quinine without becoming dizzy or getting buzzing in the ears. They may have to decide whether they would rather have cramp and no dizziness, or the reverse. But cramp in the lower limbs in the daytime and in younger, active patients can be very distressing and is more serious. It is not uncommon and has the rather clumsy name of intermittent claudications.

The patient first complains of aching legs after exercise. It may be slight, but gradually becomes more pronounced. Then the pain is not merely an ache, but a definite, crippling cramp, which can become so severe that the patient finds he or she cannot stand after much walking. Intermittent claudication is caused by the narrowing of the arteries and often starts in the 30s. It generally means that the arteries everywhere in the body have become narrowed and blood cannot reach the muscles fast enough when they are in use. The heart muscles may be equally affected.

This condition may be a good enough excuse for not doing jobs you don't like doing, but that is poor consolation. It is a disease which affects men far more than women and attacks are more common in cold weather, or even after sitting in a chair at the office in a draught. It is also a slightly hereditary complaint. This is by no means the same as the night-time cramp already mentioned, and there is no absolute cure. The patient learns to regulate the amount of exercise he or she can comfortably take. No drugs offer a complete relief but there is one habit which the sufferer must give up, smoking.

Whatever may or may not be one's views about the habit, it undoubtedly makes intermittent claudication far more troublesome. A number of patients will secretly admit that so long as they keep off tobacco they do not get this fearsome cramp.