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# Muscle Cramps

**Also called:** Charley horse

## What are muscle cramps?

Muscle cramps are sudden, involuntary contractions or spasms in one or more of your muscles. They are very common and often occur after exercise. Some people get muscle cramps, especially leg cramps, at night. They can be painful, and they may last a few seconds to several minutes.

You can have a cramp in any muscle, but they happen most often in the:

- Thighs
- Feet
- Hands
- Arms
- Abdomen
- Area along your ribcage

## What causes muscle cramps?

Causes of muscle cramps include:

- Straining or overusing a muscle. This is the most common cause.
- Compression of your nerves, from problems such as a **spinal cord injury** [<https://medlineplus.gov/spinalcordinjuries.html>] or a pinched nerve in the neck or back
- Dehydration [<https://medlineplus.gov/dehydration.html>]
- Low levels of electrolytes [<https://medlineplus.gov/fluidandelectrolytebalance.html>] such as magnesium, potassium [<https://medlineplus.gov/potassium.html>] , or calcium [<https://medlineplus.gov/calcium.html>]
- Not enough blood getting to your muscles
- Pregnancy
- Certain medicines
- Getting dialysis [<https://medlineplus.gov/dialysis.html>]

Sometimes the cause of muscle cramps is unknown.

## Who is at risk for muscle cramps?

Anyone can get muscle cramps, but they are more common in some people:

- Older adults
- People who are overweight
- Athletes
- Pregnant women
- People with certain medical conditions, such as **thyroid** [<https://medlineplus.gov/thyroiddiseases.html>] and nerve [<https://medlineplus.gov/neurologicdiseases.html>] disorders

## When do I need to see a health care provider for muscle cramps?

Muscle cramps are usually harmless, and they go away after a few minutes. But you should contact your health care provider if the cramps:

- Are severe
- Happen frequently
- Don't get better with stretching and drinking enough fluids
- Last a long time
- Are accompanied by swelling, redness, or a feeling of warmth
- Are accompanied by muscle weakness

## What are the treatments for muscle cramps?

You usually don't need treatment for muscle cramps. You may be able to find some relief from cramps by:

- Stretching or gently massaging the muscle
- Applying heat when the muscle is tight and ice when the muscle is sore
- Getting more fluids if you are dehydrated

If another medical problem is causing the cramps, treating that problem will likely help. There are medicines that providers sometimes prescribe to prevent cramps, but they are not always effective and may cause side effects. Talk to your provider about the risks and benefits of medicines.

## Can muscle cramps be prevented?

To prevent muscle cramps, you can:

- **Stretch your muscles**, especially before exercising. If you often get leg cramps at night, stretch your leg muscles before bed.
- **Drink plenty of liquids**. If you do intense exercise or exercise in the heat, sports drinks can help you replace electrolytes.

## Start Here

- Coping with Muscle Cramps: Why You Don't Have to Live with This Common Pain [<https://osteopathic.org/what-is-osteopathic-medicine/muscle-cramp/>] (American Osteopathic Association)

## Symptoms

- Muscle Cramps [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/muscle-cramps.html>] (Nemours Foundation) - **In English and Spanish**  
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/muscle-cramps.html>]

## Prevention and Risk Factors

- Muscle Cramps [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/muscle-cramps.html>] (Nemours Foundation) - **In English and Spanish**  
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/muscle-cramps.html>]

## Treatments and Therapies

- Muscle Cramps [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/muscle-cramps.html>] (Nemours Foundation) - **In English and Spanish**  
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/muscle-cramps.html>]


## Related Issues

- Heat Cramps, First Aid [<https://skinsight.com/skin-conditions/first-aid-heat-cramps/?lmiw9cApI=1>] (VisualDX)

## Specifics

- Night Leg Cramps [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/symptoms/night-leg-cramps/basics/definition/SYM-20050813?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/symptoms/night-leg-cramps/basics/definition/sym-20050813?p=1>]

## Clinical Trials


- ClinicalTrials.gov: Muscle Cramp [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Muscle+Cramp%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)

## Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: Quinine Sulfate for Muscle Cramps in Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis: A Randomized,... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40384575>]
- Article: Treatment of insomnia, restless legs, cramps, and pain associated with chronic... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40269733>]
- Article: Shaoyao-Gancao decoction for the treatment of muscle cramps in maintenance hemodialysis:... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40204247>]
- Muscle Cramps -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Muscle+Cramp%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+2+Years%22+%5Bedat%5D+NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29>]

## Find an Expert

- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases [<https://www.niams.nih.gov/>]   
Also in Spanish [<https://www.niams.nih.gov/es/portal-en-espanol>]

## Children

- Your Muscles [<https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/muscles.html>] (Nemours Foundation)  
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/kids/muscles.html>]

## Women

- How Can I Relieve My Pregnancy Leg Cramps? [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/leg-cramps.html>] (Nemours Foundation)

## Patient Handouts

- Charley horse [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002066.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/002066.htm>]
- Muscle cramps [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003193.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003193.htm>]



## MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Charley horse [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002066.htm>]

Muscle cramps [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003193.htm>]

## Related Health Topics

Dystonia [<https://medlineplus.gov/dystonia.html>]

Muscle Disorders [<https://medlineplus.gov/muscledisorders.html>]

Sports Injuries [<https://medlineplus.gov/sportsinjuries.html>]

## National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Muscle Cramps* is the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases [<http://www.niams.nih.gov/>]

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