

Cramps – causes and remedies

A muscle which contracts involuntary (without consciously willing it) is called a “spasm” if this is forceful and sustained, it becomes a cramp. This causes a visible and/or palpable hardening of the involved muscle. Cramps can last anywhere from a few seconds to up to 15 minutes. Any longer than this is very rare. It can include part of a muscle or the entire muscle, multiple muscles (hands) or simultaneous contractions from muscles which work opposite one another (hamstrings and quads). It can also affect some organs.

Cramps are extremely common. Almost everyone experiences cramp at some point in their life. They can become increasingly frequent with aging. But what causes them?

Injury – persistent muscle spasm may occur as a protective mechanism following an injury.

Vigorous activity – this is usually related to muscle fatigue after associated vigorous exercise, repetitive overuse, sitting or standing for an extended period in an awkward position.

Dehydration- one many may relate to cramping. This mainly happens in warm weather and can be an early sign of heat stroke. Sweat is our way of cooling down, within our sweat is something called sodium (salt). This sodium needs to be replenished. Many athletes involved in endurance based activities will include an electrolyte drink as well as water.

Low blood calcium, magnesium – low levels can excite the nerve endings and the muscles they stimulate. This may be caused by diuretics, hyperventilation, excessive vomiting, inadequate levels in the diet, inadequate calcium absorption due to vitamin D deficiency, and poor function of the gland that regulates calcium.

Low potassium – may cause cramp although it is more related to poor muscle weakness

Poor circulation

<http://www.acu-cell.com/dis-mus.html> explains some of the above in more detail

When cramps first start to occur, you need to make sure you are not dehydrated, so replenish your fluids. Stretching after strenuous activity can also help prevent cramping, as well as sports massage to help reduce toxins in the muscles, reduce muscle damage and restore balance to the muscles. Not, all cramps will be caused by the points above but they are the most common. Cramp is rarely caused by something more severe but if you are concerned by the cramps especially if they keep recurring often then a simple blood test can find or clear any serious problems. The right levels of the minerals mentioned above are easily gained through a balanced diet, endurance based activities, pushing the body to extremes may require a supplement, pregnancy may require extra intake of these as well. Always check first with your doctor.

Abuse of some supplements can predispose you to cramping especially the likes of Creatine based products, some medications can sometimes lead to cramping an example is those to help reduce cholesterol.

If you find yourself in cramp what can you do to ease the effects? There are many theories out there about how to reduce the effects of your cramp once it starts. The after effects of cramp can be very painful, almost like a muscle pull. I find grabbing the muscle and squeezing it as hard as you can helps, some may try to stretch it out but be aware as a cramp is a violent muscle contraction you maybe stretching a muscle that does not want to be stretched. After the cramp has settled get some fluids into your body and then get an ice pack onto the area. Cramping can cause bleeding of damaged tissues; the ice will help to stop this. If the cramp was not that severe, then light massage may help in the following days after the incident but never within the first 24 hours, 48 hours if very severe. One theory I found was to pinch your upper lip quite hard, the nerves pick up this sensation and the cramp will go, try it and see!