Leg Cramps Are A Mystery

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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. They 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. Sometimes they even collapse and are thought to have a serious injury.

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. The episode seems to leave no lasting effect.

Serious Causes
Pain in our legs can be from serious causes too. There are neurological and circulation problems that always should be checked for when someone comes to me complaining of leg cramps recurrently.
If the cramps are persistent, always take this seriously and have this evaluated for serious causes.

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 three 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, usually big workup is not needed.
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.
Serious problems can include peripheral vascular disease (PVD) often found in patients with diabetes. A careful physical exam followed by special vascular imaging studies usually is required.

A serious neurological condition mimicking leg cramps is spinal stenosis. This affects the lower spine and is caused by degenerative changes which gradually constrict around nerves that go to the legs.

If you are lucky none of what we have described in this article will affect you, but if it does this information may help you.

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

Office Website and Gratiot County Herald Archive

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Please check it out. Do yourself a favor.

Be well.

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