SYMPTOM

Charley horse

A charley horse is a sudden, painful tightening of a muscle, usually in the leg.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A sudden, tight, painful muscle knot

WHERE IT IS FELT
Usually the calf, sometimes the foot or thigh

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Muscle fatigue, prolonged positioning, fluid loss

WHEN IT IS URGENT
One leg becoming swollen, red, warm, or very tender

USUALLY LASTS
A few seconds to several minutes

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Cramps recur, disrupt sleep, or cause ongoing weakness

Overview

A charley horse is an informal name for a muscle cramp. The muscle suddenly tightens without you choosing to move it. Most occur in the calf, although the feet, toes, or thighs can also cramp.

A cramp may happen during exercise, while resting, or during sleep. It usually releases within a few minutes. The muscle may remain tender afterward.

Most charley horses are short-lived and are not caused by a serious problem. Sometimes, however, repeated cramps are related to a medicine, another health condition, or reduced blood flow or nerve function.

What it may feel or look like

A charley horse can feel like a muscle is being squeezed, twisted, or pulled into a hard knot. The pain may be intense enough to stop you from moving normally or wake you from sleep.

During the cramp, you may notice:

A muscle cramp is different from restless legs syndrome. Restless legs usually causes an urge

to move the legs rather than a hard, painful muscle contraction. Pain from reduced blood flow also tends to follow a pattern, such as starting with walking and improving with rest.

- A hard or visibly tightened muscle
- A foot or toes pulled into an unusual position
- Difficulty straightening the leg or putting the heel down
- Tenderness after the muscle relaxes

Common causes

Common causes include muscle fatigue, unfamiliar exercise, and holding a position for a long time. Cramps may also occur after heavy sweating, vomiting, or diarrhea because the body loses fluid and minerals called electrolytes.

Nighttime leg cramps often have no clear cause. They are more likely during pregnancy and later adulthood, but they can occur at any age. Tight calf muscles or long periods of sitting may contribute.

Less common causes include problems affecting nerves, muscles, circulation, or body chemistry. Examples include peripheral artery disease, diabetes-related nerve damage, thyroid disorders, and significant kidney or liver disease. These conditions usually cause other symptoms as well.

Some medicines have been linked with muscle cramps. These include certain water pills like furosemide or hydrochlorothiazide , cholesterol-lowering medicines, and inhaled medicines used to open the airways. A cramp does not necessarily mean a medicine is responsible. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without discussing it with the prescriber.

A painful leg is not always a muscle cramp. A blood clot, infection, injury, or sudden loss of circulation can cause pain that needs prompt assessment, especially when swelling, skin changes, numbness, or weakness are present.

When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine appointment if cramps:

Seek same-day medical care if one leg becomes swollen, red, warm, or unusually tender. These can be signs of a blood clot or infection rather than a simple cramp. Prompt care is also appropriate for severe pain after an injury or cramps with repeated vomiting, diarrhea, or signs of dehydration.

Call emergency services if leg pain or swelling occurs with shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing up blood, fainting, or a very fast heartbeat. A blood clot can sometimes travel to the lungs.

Emergency assessment is also needed if a leg or foot suddenly becomes pale, cold, numb, or weak, particularly when severe pain is present. This may signal a sudden problem with blood flow.

- Happen often or are becoming more severe
- Regularly interrupt sleep or daily activity
- Do not improve with basic self-care
- Began after starting or changing a medicine
- Occur with ongoing weakness, numbness, or muscle loss

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the cramps occur, how long they last, which muscles are involved, and what makes them better or worse. They may ask about exercise, fluid loss, pregnancy, medical conditions, and medicines or supplements.

An examination may check muscle strength, reflexes, sensation, pulses, swelling, and skin temperature or colour.

Tests are not always needed for occasional, typical cramps. Blood tests may be considered when cramps are frequent, unexplained, or accompanied by other symptoms. Depending on the situation, tests might assess kidney function, thyroid function, blood sugar, or electrolyte levels. Tests of nerves or blood flow are reserved for symptoms suggesting those problems.

Treatment and self-care

During a calf cramp, gently straighten your knee and pull your toes toward your shin. If it is safe to stand, place the affected foot flat on the floor and slowly lean forward while keeping the heel down. Gentle massage or walking may help the muscle release.

Afterward, warmth may relax a tight muscle. A cold pack wrapped in cloth can help if the area remains sore. Avoid forceful stretching, particularly if an injury may have occurred.

Regular calf stretching may help some people who get nighttime cramps. Stretch gently rather than bouncing. If exercise triggers cramps, increase activity gradually and allow time for

recovery.

Drink according to thirst and replace fluids after heavy sweating or illness. Sports drinks and electrolyte supplements are not routinely necessary. Potassium, magnesium, or salt supplements should not be taken for cramps unless a healthcare professional has identified a reason, because excess amounts can be harmful.

Evidence does not show that magnesium reliably prevents ordinary nighttime cramps in most adults, though clinical advice may differ during pregnancy or when a deficiency is found.

Quinine is not considered a safe routine treatment for leg cramps. It can cause serious blood, heart rhythm, and allergic reactions. Do not use quinine or quinine-containing products for cramps unless specifically prescribed for another condition.

What to expect

Most charley horses stop within seconds or a few minutes. Mild tenderness can remain for several hours, especially after a strong cramp.

Occasional cramps may not return once a trigger such as unusual exercise or fluid loss has passed. Repeated cramps may take longer to manage because the pattern, medicines, and possible underlying conditions need to be reviewed.

Common questions

Can a charley horse cause a blood clot?

An ordinary muscle cramp does not cause a blood clot. However, clot-related leg pain can be mistaken for a cramp. One-sided swelling, warmth, redness, or persistent tenderness needs same-day assessment.

Does a charley horse mean I am low in potassium?

Not necessarily. Cramps have many possible causes, and most do not prove that potassium is low. Blood testing is the reliable way to identify an electrolyte problem.

Why do cramps happen at night?

The exact reason is often unclear. Sleeping positions, shortened calf muscles, long periods of sitting, pregnancy, age, and some health conditions or medicines may contribute.

Should I exercise after a cramp?

Gentle movement is usually reasonable once the cramp releases. Stop or reduce activity if pain

returns, the muscle remains weak, or you suspect an injury.

Sources

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