SYMPTOM

Leg pain

Leg pain is discomfort anywhere from the hip to the foot.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, cramping, burning, throbbing, or sharp pain

WHERE IT IS FELT
Anywhere from the hip to the foot

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Muscle strain, cramps, joint problems

WHEN IT IS URGENT
One leg becomes swollen, warm, and painful

USUALLY LASTS
Days after minor strain; longer with joint or nerve causes

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists, recurs, worsens, or limits walking

Overview

Leg pain can come from the muscles, joints, bones, nerves, blood vessels, or skin. It may affect a small area or most of the leg. Some pain begins after exercise or an injury. Other pain develops gradually or seems to start without a clear reason.

Most leg pain is not an emergency. Muscle soreness, cramps, and minor strains often improve with time and simple care. However, new swelling in one leg, sudden problems with blood flow, or pain with breathing symptoms needs prompt medical attention.

Your other symptoms, recent activities, health conditions, and medicines can help a healthcare professional work out the likely cause.

What it may feel or look like

Leg pain can be constant or come and go. It may feel like:

The leg may look normal. Depending on the cause, there may also be bruising, swelling, redness, warmth, a rash, or a change in skin colour.

Notice whether the pain began suddenly or gradually, what makes it better or worse, and

whether you can walk normally. These details can be useful when seeking care.

- A dull ache or heaviness
- A sudden muscle cramp
- Sharp pain during movement
- Burning, tingling, or "pins and needles"
- Pain that travels from the back or buttock down the leg
- Throbbing pain with swelling or tenderness
- Pain during walking that eases with rest

Common causes

Common causes include muscle soreness after unfamiliar exercise, a minor strain, and muscle cramps. Cramps are sudden, painful tightening of a muscle, often in the calf. They may happen during activity, at rest, or at night.

Joint problems can cause pain around the hip, knee, or ankle. Osteoarthritis, which is wear-related change within a joint, often causes stiffness and pain that is worse with activity. Sprains affect the strong bands that support a joint and often follow a twist or awkward movement.

Other possible causes include nerve irritation, such as sciatica. Sciatica is pain from irritation of the large nerve running from the lower back into the leg. It may cause burning pain, tingling, numbness, or weakness.

Reduced blood flow through narrowed arteries can cause calf, thigh, or buttock pain during walking that improves after resting. This is called peripheral artery disease. Varicose veins may cause aching, itching, swelling, or a heavy feeling.

Some medicines and health conditions can contribute to muscle pain or cramps. Skin infections, gout, stress fractures, and inflammatory joint conditions are less common possibilities.

Urgent causes include a blood clot in a deep vein, known as deep vein thrombosis or DVT. This can cause new pain, swelling, warmth, or colour change, usually in one leg. A serious infection, a major fracture, or a sudden blockage of an artery can also cause severe leg pain. Symptoms alone cannot confirm which cause is present.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if leg pain occurs with:

Seek same-day medical care if one leg becomes newly swollen, warm, red or darker, and painful. This is especially important after surgery, a long period of limited movement, or a long journey.

Same-day assessment is also appropriate for rapidly increasing pain or swelling, fever with red or hot skin, inability to put weight on the leg after an injury, or new weakness or significant numbness.

Book a routine appointment if the pain keeps returning, is getting worse, lasts longer than expected after a minor injury, wakes you often, or limits walking and daily activities. Pain that regularly starts during walking and stops with rest should also be assessed.

- Sudden shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing blood, or fainting
- A leg or foot that suddenly becomes cold, pale, blue, numb, or weak
- Heavy bleeding, an obvious deformity, or a major injury
- New leg weakness with facial drooping or trouble speaking
- Loss of bladder or bowel control with numbness around the groin

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask where the pain is, how it began, and whether it is linked to movement, rest, or walking. They may ask about injuries, back pain, swelling, fever, travel, surgery, pregnancy, health conditions, and medicines.

The examination may include checking the joints, muscles, skin, strength, sensation, and movement. The clinician may feel pulses in the feet and compare the temperature, colour, and size of both legs.

Tests are not always needed. Depending on the findings, testing might include an ultrasound to look for a blood clot, an X-ray for a suspected bone or joint injury, or blood tests for inflammation or infection. MRI or other scans may be used when a nerve, soft-tissue injury, or stress fracture is suspected.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. For a minor strain or soreness after activity, reduce activities

that clearly increase the pain, but avoid staying completely still for long periods. Gentle movement can help prevent stiffness.

A wrapped cold pack may ease pain and swelling during the first day or two after a recent injury. Do not place ice directly on the skin. Elevating the leg may also help with mild injury-related swelling.

Over-the-counter pain medicines may be suitable for some people. Check the label and ask a pharmacist or clinician if you have other health conditions, take regular medicines, are pregnant, or are unsure which option is safe for you.

Gentle calf stretching may help some muscle cramps. Regular hydration is sensible, especially during heat or exercise, but recurring cramps can have several causes and are not always due to dehydration.

Do not massage a newly swollen, warm, painful leg or rely on home treatment if a blood clot is possible. Infections, blood clots, circulation problems, fractures, and significant nerve problems need treatment directed at the underlying cause.

What to expect

Mild exercise soreness and minor strains often begin improving within several days, although full recovery can take longer. Increase activity gradually rather than returning immediately to the activity that triggered the pain.

Pain from joint, nerve, or circulation problems may last longer or return. Once the cause is clearer, treatment may focus on improving movement, reducing symptoms, and managing the underlying condition.

Arrange follow-up if recovery stops, the pain changes, or new swelling, weakness, numbness, fever, or skin changes develop.

Common questions

Can leg pain come from my back?

Yes. Irritated nerves in the lower back can cause pain that travels through the buttock and down the leg. Tingling, numbness, or weakness may occur as well.

Is calf pain always a blood clot?

No. Muscle strain and cramps are common causes of calf pain. However, new one-sided swelling, warmth, tenderness, or colour change needs same-day assessment because

symptoms cannot reliably rule out a clot.

Should I keep walking?

Gentle walking is often reasonable for mild soreness if it does not clearly worsen the pain. Stop and seek advice if walking causes severe pain, the leg gives way, or you have new swelling, weakness, or numbness.

Why does my leg hurt only when I walk?

Muscle or joint problems can cause activity-related pain. Pain that predictably begins after walking a certain distance and eases with rest can also be related to reduced blood flow and should be assessed.

Sources

- NHS: Leg cramps - symptoms, causes, self-care, and when to seek help
- NHS: Deep vein thrombosis - signs of DVT and urgent symptoms
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: About venous thromboembolism - blood clot symptoms and complications
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute: Peripheral artery disease - symptoms and assessment of reduced leg blood flow
- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons: Muscle strains in the thigh - muscle strain symptoms, assessment, and recovery