

# Muscle Spasms

## *What are muscle spasms?*

Muscle spasms are involuntary contractions of a muscle. People often have "tight" muscles in their neck, back, shoulder, or legs. These are muscle spasms. Athletes sometimes get cramps in their muscles during strenuous activity. These cramps are also spasms.

A common name for a muscle cramp or spasm is charley horse. This term is especially used for cramps in the leg.

## *How do they occur?*

A spasm usually occurs from overusing muscles or from an injury. If you are dehydrated during strenuous activity, you are likely to have cramps.

Muscle spasms, especially in the neck, also may occur when you are under lots of stress.

Cramps in the calf of the leg often occur at night during sleep.

## *What are the symptoms?*

A spasm feels like tightness or a knot in a muscle. It may hurt when you use the muscle. It may be hard to use the muscle.

A cramp during exercise may be extremely painful.

## *How are they diagnosed?*

Your health care provider will examine your muscles and find that they are very tight and tender to touch.

## *How are they treated?*

Put ice packs on spasms caused by injury for the first 2 to 3 days. Use the ice for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 to 4 hours.

Try stretching the muscle. For example, you can stretch a cramp in the calf of your leg by straightening your lower leg and pulling your foot toward your head. It may also help to stand on the leg that is cramping.

Spasms that last a long time may be treated with moist heat for 20 to 30 minutes several times a day.

Your health care provider may give you stretching exercises.

Massage is very helpful.

If you have severe cramps in your legs at night, your health care provider may prescribe some medicine to help.

## *How can muscle spasms be prevented?*

Proper stretching exercises will help prevent spasms.

Loosen the covers at the foot of your bed to help prevent leg cramps when you are sleeping.

If you tend to get muscle cramps during exercise, make sure you drink enough fluids. Sports drinks may be very helpful.

Some spasms may be caused by poor posture. For example, you may have neck spasms after sitting at a computer terminal for too long or in an awkward position. These spasms may be prevented with better posture.