

Nocturnal Leg Cramps

What are nocturnal leg cramps?

Leg cramps are sometimes called charley horses or muscle spasms. They happen when your leg muscles tighten and it is hard to relax them.

Leg cramps come and go, sometimes for hours, and usually occur at night. They mostly affect the lower legs, but can also happen in your feet or thighs.

How do I know if I have leg cramps?

There are other conditions that cause symptoms similar to leg cramps. Your doctor can review your symptoms to be sure you have leg cramps. You may need tests to rule out other conditions.

Restless legs syndrome is an uncontrollable feeling that you need to move your legs. It is uncomfortable but not painful. Claudication is leg pain when you exercise. It happens when blood doesn't flow normally to your muscles. Myalgias are deep, aching muscle pains that are not related to nighttime or exercise. Neuropathy is numbness, tingling, and pain caused by nerve damage.

What causes leg cramps?

It is unclear what causes leg cramps. They could be caused by tired muscles or damaged nerves. Some medicines may cause leg cramps, but this is uncommon. Leg cramps are more likely in older people, pregnant women, and people who have certain medical problems, like heart disease, nerve conditions, cancer, and liver or kidney problems.

How are leg cramps treated?

Stretching and exercise might be helpful and could keep you from having more leg cramps. Some medicines, like muscle relaxants, also may help. Talk with your doctor about what treatment is best for you.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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