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**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. Athletes sometimes get cramps in their muscles during strenuous activity. Muscle 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 happens 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 happen at night during sleep. There are many theories about why this happens but the cause is unknown.

**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 healthcare provider will examine your muscles and find that they are very tight and tender to touch.

**How are they treated?**

To treat this condition:

* Put an ice pack, gel pack, or package of frozen vegetables, wrapped in a cloth on the area every 3 to 4 hours, for up to 20 minutes at a time.
* 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. Use moist heat for up to 20 minutes at a time to help relax tight muscles or muscle spasms. Do not use heat if you have swelling.
* Follow your provider's instructions for doing exercises to help you recover.
* Massage is very helpful.
* If you have severe cramps in your legs at night, your healthcare provider may prescribe some medicine to help.

**How can muscle spasms be prevented?**

To prevent muscle spasms, stretch before you exercise. If you tend to get muscle cramps during exercise, make sure you drink enough fluids. Sports drinks may be very helpful. You can loosen the covers at the foot of your bed to help prevent leg cramps when you are sleeping. Correcting your posture when sitting a table or computer may help reduce spasms in your back or neck.

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[References](http://www.merckmedicus.com/pp/us/hcp/hcp_patient_resource_allhandouts_content_search.jsp?pg=/ppdocs/us/common/crs/aha/aha_musspasm_sma_refs.htm)
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