

# 3 WAYS TO TREAT MUSCLE CRAMPS

We ask our three experts for alternative suggestions on how to treat muscle cramps

*I am a relatively healthy 35-year-old woman, but over the past two years I have been suffering from muscle cramps in my calves. It happens mostly at night and it is really painful and lasts for about three minutes. I do not do weights in the gym, instead I go for a 45 minute brisk walk four times a week and I try to stretch my legs before and after. What do you recommend I can do to stop this regular muscle cramping?*

## The Dietitian: SARAH KEOGH

1 Cramps can be surprisingly painful and more common than you might think. In teenagers, they can coincide with a growth spurt, but in adults two causes are dehydration and lack of minerals in the diet. Try boosting potassium by eating foods like bananas, tomatoes and oranges (chocolate is also a good source...). Calcium and magnesium are also important so make sure you are getting three servings of milk, cheese or yoghurt everyday. For magnesium, look for seeds, especially sunflower seeds which are particularly rich in this nutrient. Finally, make sure you are drinking enough liquid. Being even slightly dehydrated can lead to cramps – in your legs and your stomach. When you are finished walking, always drink at least 500ml of water and aim to get 2 litres in total over the whole day.

## The Doctor: JOHN MC CORMICK

2 Muscle cramps are a common complaint and the calves are the most common site that they occur in. It was thought that dehydration, very tight muscles or problems with sodium and potassium, electrolytes in your bloodstream, were possible causes of muscle cramps, but there is no hard evidence to support this, and it is now believed that it is a problem with nerve activity in the muscle itself.

It will help if you visit a physiotherapist who may be able to identify a particular problem within your muscle groups in your calves, or even identify a problem with your back or pelvis that is contributing to the cramps. In addition they will also be able to instruct you on effective stretching exercises. Stretching, massage and adequate hydration should help prevent muscle cramps, while ice and physiotherapy is generally the treatment if they occur.

From a medical viewpoint, muscle cramps in the calves are also associated with a number of important medical problems, mainly poor circulation in the legs, spine or disc problems in your back, and restless leg syndrome. Circulation problems typically cause pain when walking as the muscle is not getting enough blood and as a result sufferers will get cramping type pain in their calves, but they are typically smokers and in an older age group. Pressure on nerve roots in the back that may occur due to disc problems will lead to similar symptoms while restless leg syndrome manifests itself as 'jumping' and twitching of the legs at night-time. If you think your problem may be related to any of these conditions then you should get checked by your doctor.

## The Acupuncturist: SUZANNE CAFFERKY

3 There are several reasons for cramping: hyperflexion, inadequate oxygenation, extreme changes in temperature; dehydration; low blood salt; or low blood calcium. You should seek advice from your GP about this but they may also be a symptom/complication of, kidney disease, thyroid disease, restless legs syndrome, and multiple sclerosis to name but a few).

Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine is great for sorting out cramping whether it be from a deep systemic problem or just overtraining. Today, a lot of serious athletes use this to help with the exact problem you are describing, as acupuncture and herbs help to nourish the tendons, ligaments and the muscular system by increasing the blood flow throughout the body. In a TCM clinic, we would consider your age and ask a lot of detailed questions about things like menstruation, skin, hair, digestive system etc to help form a diagnosis. What jumps to mind here is liver blood deficiency and it is manifesting itself in its textbook way as muscle cramps. Blood deficiency has its roots in the liver energy (qi) and in TCM, liver blood nourishes the muscles, tendons and ligaments. However, blood deficiency

is a very complex problem and is not to be mistaken with a low haemoglobin count.

From a practical point of view, while cramping, try this simple acupressure technique; when in spasm, grab the lower lip (reflects the lower body) between the index finger and the thumb. Hold without hurting for 30 to 40 seconds and this should ease the pain! The reasoning is the midpoint of the two lips has the ability to transmit a message to the brain influencing the motor system to relax the muscles. Alternatively, grab hold of the spasm by pressing your index finger into the centre of the muscle for up to 15 minutes while breathing deeply.

We have some wonderful herbal preparations to resolve this problem but you need to seek a proper diagnosis beforehand. Alternatively, try taking a good supplement of magnesium at night time, a hot bath to increase circulation, and use essential oils like sweet marjoram, rosemary and black pepper in a base oil on the affected area. Also half a tsp of Apple cider vinegar taken daily or while cramping has been proven by Brigham Young University in Utah to stop cramping in 45% of cases as opposed to 37% who only drank water. Last but not least, seek advice about your footwear, as it may be the biomechanics of your feet that actually need attention.

## MEET THE EXPERTS

### The acupuncturist:

SUZANNE CAFFERKY is an acupuncturist/herbalist practicing in Drogheda.  
[www.suzannecafferky.com](http://www.suzannecafferky.com)



### The doctor:

DR. JOHN MC CORMICK GP  
Dr. John Mc Cormick graduated from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 2001 and holds a special interest in minor surgery, vasectomy, aesthetic medicine and lifestyle management.



### The dietitian:

SARAH KEOGH, MSC, BSC, MINDI runs a private practice at the Albany Clinic in Lower Fitzwilliam Street in Dublin, as well as a food and nutrition consultancy ([www.eatwell.ie](http://www.eatwell.ie)).

