

# Dr. Colin Gage

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*"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"*

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## Ever had a "Charley Horse"?

A muscle cramp is a sudden, uncontrolled contraction of a muscle. This type of pain is most commonly experienced in the legs, and therefore often called a leg cramp or a "charley horse."

Leg cramps occur when the muscle suddenly and forcefully contracts. The most common muscles to contract in this manner are muscles that cross two joints. These muscles include the calf (crossing the ankle and knee), the hamstring (crossing the knee and hip), and the thigh or quadriceps (also crossing the knee and hip).

Leg cramps usually last less than one minute, but may last several minutes before the contraction subsides. In some patients, the leg cramps occur primarily at night, and can awaken you from sleep. Leg cramps are more common in young (adolescent age) and older (over 65) patients.

The exact cause of a leg cramp is not well understood, but there are some risk factors that are thought to contribute to this condition:

Muscle fatigue

Heavy exercising

Dehydration

High weight (not necessarily obesity)

Electrolyte imbalances

Not stretching enough

The most common cause that is typically seen in people who develop leg cramps is exercising in an unusual way, meaning they are doing more activity than normal or different exercise than they are accustomed to doing. The following are three important things you can do to prevent leg cramps from happening in the first place.

1) Stay Hydrated. It is not well known exactly how dehydration and muscle cramping are related, but it is known that dehydration can predispose to leg cramps. Drink at least three full

glasses of water each day, including one before bedtime. Also drink plenty of fluid before, during, and after exercise.

2) Stretch Regularly. Stretching can relax muscle fibers. When working out, a good post-work out stretching routine can help relax muscles and prevent cramps. Make sure you cool down after exercising, and do not exercise vigorously just prior to sleep.

3) Train Gradually. Gradually build up an exercise program, and try to avoid sudden increases in activity. The "10% Rule" is a good rule of thumb: never increase your exercise over one week by more than 10% compared to the week before. Sudden changes in activities can cause leg cramps.

What do you do if a muscle cramp strikes? Usually instinct takes over and you massage and stretch the sore muscle. This is a perfect instinct and often solves the problem. The best steps are:

- 1) Massage the cramped muscle
- 2) Stretch the muscle, gently and slowly!
- 3) Apply heat to help the muscle relax

For more information on muscle cramps and how to stretch the involved muscles properly, ask your chiropractor.