

Medicine for Managers

Reader Request

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Cramp

This article is dedicated to all those of you who have danced around the bedroom floor at 3.00 a.m. trying to relieve a severe spasm in a leg, probably whilst trying to avoid disturbing a partner. Nearly everyone will have suffered from them at some time in their lives. So, what are they and what can we do about them?

Cramp occurs when a muscle suddenly and uncontrollably contracts resulting in a painful spasm. The spasm may last from a few seconds to a few minutes. Cramp affecting the muscles of the thigh tend to last the longest. The calves, however, are most commonly affected and the effect can be felt during exercise or suddenly in the middle of the night. The muscle feels hard during an episode.

The cause of cramp is unknown in many cases, so doctors use that very helpful word 'idiopathic'. It has been suggested that they might be caused by unusual nerve activity or reduced blood supply but there is no good evidence to support either theory.

It is estimated that 40% of patients over 60 get cramp and 40% of them have cramps more than twice a week. It is thought that, in older people, the increased frequency may be associated with

shortening of the tendons which is a natural age change. However, anyone can get cramp, including children.

For most people the cramps occur only occasionally and they do not tell their GP about them. In some cases the cramp may be

associated with an identifiable event such as pregnancy, when up to one third of women are affected, or following exercise, liver disease or the use of statins, used in the treatment of raised cholesterol, diuretics or nifedipine, used to treat raised blood pressure, angina and Raynaud's disease.

Three out of four people have cramp only at night. Only one in fifteen has them only during the day

Clearly treatment of cramp in those patients with an identifiable cause is by managing the cause in question.

However for those where no cause is apparent, they can be treated by exercise with, or

without, medication. Exercise will relieve cramp during an episode by stretching the affected muscle, hence doing the paso doble in the bedroom in the middle of the night.

Simple stretching of the calf muscles by pointing the toes upwards so that only the heel of the foot is on the ground should help. It has also been shown that exercising regularly does reduce the frequency of cramps, particularly before bed by carrying out the same stretching exercises pointing the toes upwards and keeping only the heel on the ground.

Quinine is used in the treatment of cramp. Originally introduced in the treatment of malaria it does seem to help many patients in reducing the frequency of cramps. The dose is one tablet at night.

The incidence of side effects is low with the medication but are significant and so the decision to use quinine will depend on the frequency of the episodes, whether exercising has failed and to what extent the cramps affect sleep or quality of life.

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