

Managing Muscle cramps

Muscle cramps associated with exercise are usually involuntary painful contractions of the muscles. They can range from a slight spasm to severe cramp where the muscle feels hard and very painful lasting from seconds to minutes. Although the spasms or cramps can occur in any skeletal muscle they tend to occur in the muscles of the lower limb i.e thighs, calves and feet. They can also occur in waves with the cramps returning several times before easing.

Despite considerable research in the cause of exercise induced muscle cramps the exact cause is still not clear. Common theories put forward include: Dehydration, Salt (electrolyte) depletion especially in heat, tiredness, poor level of conditioning, inadequate stretching and a change due to exercise of the nerves controlling the muscles.

Once you actually have a muscle cramp then it is suggested to stop the activity and stretch and hold the affected muscle in a stretch until the cramp subsides. As there is no one clear hypothesis for the cause of cramps there is no definitive treatment. Suggestions put forward to try and help reduce cramps include:

- Good hydration
- Regular warm up and stretching of commonly affected muscles before and after exercising
- Reduce muscle fatigue by improving fitness

Replacing salts (electrolytes) has been suggested by either special drinks or even bananas which contain potassium and although there is no clear evidence of benefit, they are not harmful in moderation. Most muscle cramps are self limiting but if persistent and worsening then seek medical advice for further investigation and assessment.

If, after reading these guidelines you have any questions concerning physical activity/exercise related health issues please forward to me and I will do my best to answer them in further issues.

Dr Zafar Iqbal
MBBS, BSc, DCH, DRCOG, MRCP, MSc, MFSEM (UK), Dip PCR
First Team Dr Liverpool FC
Sports and Exercise Medicine Physician