

BE WELL

Champing at the Bit to Halt Charley Horse

By Debbie DeAngelo
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You're drifting off to sleep when suddenly you shoot up, clutching your calf as the muscle painfully spasms and becomes rock hard. Yes, it's the dreaded Charley horse.

Reportedly coined after a baseball reference, a Charley horse is a colloquial term for a gripping muscle spasm. It can occur in virtually any muscle but commonly strikes the calves, feet, and neck. Although they can happen to anyone, day or night, Charley horses present in athletes, seniors, and pregnant women more frequently. No one knows for sure what causes these cramps in healthy adults but

there are a few risk factors that make you more likely to experience them. These include tight or overworked muscles; not drinking enough fluid throughout the day; deficiencies in key minerals, like magnesium and potassium; nerve compression in the spine; medical conditions such as vascular problems, diabetes, and kidney disease; and certain medications.

Preventing a Charley horse depends on what triggers it. Proactively avoid them by implementing several strategies. Drink a variety of fluids at frequent intervals over the course of the day. You'll know if you're consuming enough if your urine is clear to very pale yellow in color. Eat fruits and vegetables at each meal to help correct mineral imbalances. Supplementing 300 to 400 milligrams of magnesium citrate once to twice daily may be helpful but don't take potassium tablets unless you're under medical supervision. Another effective way to absorb magnesium into the muscles is to soak in an Epsom salt bath. Add two cups of Epsom and one cup of baking soda to a tub of warm water and relax in it for 15 to 20 minutes. Additionally, stretching during the day and prior to turning in at night will relax tight muscles. Using a foam roller or massage gun augments stretching exercises.

Being physically fit keeps your muscles healthy and in good condition. Besides stretching before and after exercising, increase the intensity of your workouts gradually. Doing too much, too soon, will fatigue muscles and leave them vulnerable to cramping. Avoid remaining in the same position for hours on end during the day. Keep your blood circulating by getting up and moving frequently. Since 60% of these diabolical twinges are of the middle-of-the-night variety, be sure to stretch your muscles before crawling into bed. Once there, loosen the covers. Any time your toes are pointing downward for prolonged periods, your calves are tightening. That means sleeping on your back, especially with heavy covers weighing down on your feet, sets you up for them. To relieve this pressure, roll up a blanket and place it beneath the covers by your feet to "tent" them. Sleeping on your stomach with your toes lying flat against the bed should be avoided too. Remedy this by placing a folded blanket beneath your shins.

If you regularly take medication, ask your pharmacist if any of them could be instigating the problem. Common culprits include diuretics (water pills), statins (cholesterol medicine) and beta agonists (breathing medicine). There may be an alternative that can be substituted.

Despite your best efforts, you may continue to get a Charley horse. Once you're in the throes of one in your calf, try to flex your toes up toward your head. For a greater stretch, wrap a towel or necktie around the ball of your foot and pull it towards you. If you suffer from frequent bouts, be sure to keep these items next to your bed. If the cramping isn't relieved or it's in your foot, thigh, or shin, get up and walk around. Bearing weight often helps the muscle to release. Massaging and applying heat facilitates relaxation of the muscle too.

There are countless over-the-counter products on the market geared toward reining in a Charley horse. The only way to know if they will work for you is to experiment with them. Two products with promising testimonials include Theraworx and Caleb Treeze Old Amish Muscle Tonic. If muscle cramps become frequent, severe or are accompanied by other changes in your health, be sure to bring it to the attention of your health care provider.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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