

# Leg Cramps - Ouch!

Along with swelling and varicose veins, leg cramps are an annoying part of pregnancy. These painful spasms that radiate through your calves and up your legs are very common. Although they can be felt during the day, they're usually more noticeable at night, when fatigue and fluid accumulation are at their peak (and when you have all that quiet and stillness to ponder them). Knowing what to do when you get a cramp and how to possibly prevent leg cramps from happening can make your pregnancy a bit more comfortable.

## What are leg cramps?

Cramps are sudden, sharp pain, usually in your calf muscles or feet. A cramp is a sign that your muscles are contracting very tightly when they shouldn't be. They usually happen at night and are more common late in your pregnancy. They can be very uncomfortable and it can be hard to know what to do.

There are many suggested reasons for cramps while you're pregnant - but the truth is that nobody really knows.

- Fatigue - this is normal, you're growing a tiny human!
- Weight gain - the pressure from your growing baby can take a toll on your nerves and blood vessels, including the ones that go to your legs
- Compression of the blood vessels in the legs
- Diet (an excess of phosphorus and a shortage of calcium or magnesium)
- Not being active enough - keep moving, not marathons but gentle regular exercise is great
- Dehydration - this can cause and worsen leg cramps. If you're experiencing them, try upping your daily water intake.

## Can leg cramps be prevented during pregnancy?

While leg cramps during pregnancy aren't exactly preventable, there are a few steps you can take that may minimise the frequency and duration:

Gentle exercises - such as walking or swimming, and specific exercises, including calf raises and walking on the spot, are good for helping blood flow in the legs and might help to prevent cramping.

You could try specific foot and leg muscle exercises such as:

- bending and stretching your foot quickly up and down 30 times
- rotating your ankle 8 times one way and 8 times the other
- repeating with the other foot

Switch it up - alternate periods of activity with periods of rest throughout the day. Put your feet up, kick back with your feet raised as often as you can when you're seated.

Update your wardrobe - not as sexy as it sounds sorry! Try sporting a pair of support hose (aka compression socks) during the day, which may help reduce swelling in the ankles and feet by improving circulation in your lower extremities. If possible, try to wear shoes with a firm heel counter (the part that cups the heel) to properly position your foot in the shoe.

Staying hydrated. Make sure you're drinking plenty of water (most pregnant women need about eight to 10 glasses of fluids a day). A good sign you're hydrated: Your pee is light yellow, not golden or dark in colour. Eat a well-balanced diet - it should include lots of calcium (try yoghurt, which may also help with pregnancy constipation) and magnesium (bananas are full of it). And, if you're thinking of taking supplements, chat with your LMC and ask before taking any.

### **If you get leg cramps, try the following:**

- Flex your feet, straighten your leg and gently flex your ankle and toes back toward your shins several times. You can do this in bed, but you may find you get faster relief if you get up and do it on your feet.
- Cool it, try standing on a cold surface, which can sometimes stop a spasm. An ice pack or cool compress may also help.
- Warm up, if stretching and cold help subside the pain, try a heating pad for added relief.
- Get a massage, another option is to treat yourself to an antenatal massage or ask your partner to give you a rub-down. (Don't continue with massage if the pain persists).

### **Could it be more serious?**

If the pain is severe and persistent (and if you notice swelling, warmth or redness in the area), talk to your LMC or healthcare professional. In very rare cases you could have a blood clot in a vein known as deep vein thrombosis (DVT) that requires medical attention.

A DVT blood clot can occur in the legs, thigh, or pelvis. Pregnant women are 5 to 10 times more likely to develop a DVT than non-pregnant women. While there's no need to panic that you'll get one - it's pretty uncommon to start with- but, knowledge is power.

If your job requires a lot of sitting, you could set a quiet alarm on your phone to go off every hour to remind you to get up and walk - perhaps to the water cooler to add to your water intake for the day!

Two birds, one stone and all that!

Symptoms of a blood clot are similar to leg cramps, but a DVT blood clot is a medical emergency. Seek medical care right away if you experience symptoms like:

- a lot of pain in your legs when you're standing or moving around
- severe swelling
- warm-to-the-touch skin near the affected area

**Leg cramps are a common pregnancy symptom. (That doesn't make having them any easier, but now you understand them better, it hopefully it turns down the stress dial a bit.)**

**If you're concerned about your pain or they're causing too much lost shut-eye, mention it at your next checkup with your LMC.**

