

Outdoor health tips from the Posse:

Preventing nagging Charley horse

I had spent the day on a particularly grueling backpack trip. Just about everything went wrong. I had misjudged the steepness of the area I would be hiking, thereby increasing the duration of the walk.


The boots I chose for this forced march were only ankle high, which made for several interesting creek crossings. It was there I noticed a major leak in both boots; the big opening where your foot goes. Hip waders would have been a better choice for the crossings.

My only solace was the knowledge that after a bite of hot supper, I was going to pass into a coma in my sleeping bag, not moving until dawn. I climbed into the bag, belly full, and began to drift into a sleep.

It was an hour later that I awoke with the tightening of leg muscles. I had charley horses that could have won the Triple Crown. In fact, my left calf was running the derby, with the left calf a half-length behind. The charley horse extended from my trapezoid to my peroneus longus. There would be no sleep for me that night, and I decided I needed to get to the bottom of these charley horses.

Charley horse is just another name for a muscle spasm. The spasm can occur in any muscle in the body but are most common in the legs. These spasms can be uncomfortable, all the way to excruciating. Anyone who has been awoken in the night by a spasm can attest to the pain.

If the spasm from the contracting muscle does not let up in a few seconds, the pain can quickly become severe. A severe charley horse can leave you with muscle pain that lasts for a few hours, all the way up to a few days. Most of the time, simple charley horses are normal.



Mark Rackay
Tips from the Posse

Recurring and frequent muscle spasms can be a symptom of an underlying and more serious health condition. If you take diuretics, it can lead to low potassium levels, thereby causing spasms. Spasms can also be a sign of a nerve compression in the spine.

For our purposes here, we will assume that you suffer from infrequent charley horses, usually after a day of activity. These types of charley horses can be treated at home, and oftentimes can be prevented. As for prevention, I usually don't think about charley horses until I am dancing around, doing a one-legger in pain.

For the average outdoor person, there are three main causes of leg muscle spasms: tiredness from pushing yourself too hard, dehydration, or an imbalance of electrolytes in your system.

The average person who suffers from charley horses is someone who may not be used to hiking under load, and has done a long hike that puts too much strain on their muscles at once. A person should work their way up gradually to let their muscles get used to the exertion of a long hike, especially with the load of a pack. This can be a problem for experienced hikers during the early part of their season, when they are not in top condition yet.

I personally tire of hearing about how I am not drinking enough water. In my case, dehydration has been linked to every illness or health infliction or injury I have ever suffered. Unless I take up life in a fish tank, I don't see how I can drink any more water. With all that being said, dehydration is still a problem.

Something people often forget, myself included, drinking enough during the colder months, when you don't get heated up and perspire like it's the middle of summer. Even though walking



Two friendly horses named Caliber and Dakota. (Sarah Rackay Watkins/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

seems mundane and easy going, it will deplete your fluid levels and cause dehydration related muscle spasms.

When you perspire, you lose electrolytes, especially salt, as well as water. If drinking water during your hike does not reduce the cramping in your legs, salt depletion could be the cause. Eat a salty snack and wash it down with a bottle of water as soon as you feel the cramps. If you are salt deficient, the cramps will subside in minutes.

The sodium deficit required to prompt muscle spasms is not completely understood. Several studies estimate that sweat induced sodium losses between 20 and 30 percent are enough to produce severe muscle spasms.

Most of the outdoor foods and snacks we pack on our trips have enough salt without us having to add extra. However, if you are perspiring profusely, and your skin is somewhat chalky with salt, consume extra salt along with electrolytes such as potassium and magnesium to speed your recovery.

Not eating properly can lead

to leg cramps. Foods such as green leafy vegetables, fruits like bananas and apples, slow-release carbohydrates like oats, cheese and nuts will provide your body with calcium and magnesium. These are two important minerals that help control muscle contractions and relaxation.

Another way to prevent leg cramps is to start off slowly, allowing your muscles a chance to warm up. A few minutes of stretching is also in order here. Stretch out any areas that may cause you problems during your hike, such as calf muscles and hamstrings.

Rest periods are what get me into the most trouble. It is akin to curling up on the couch with a good book on a rainy day. After a half hour, try and uncurl, and you will see what I mean. It is this reason you see many experienced hikers and backpackers choose to stand, rather than sit on rest breaks.

If you sit too long in one place during your rest stops, your muscles cool down and tighten up. This tightening up will quickly lead to cramping. Keep the rest

breaks short enough to catch your breath and move along.


When you start out, after that rest break, do so slowly, as you did in the beginning of the hike. A few stretches during a rest stop never hurt anything either. As I have aged, I have really discovered the benefits of stretching, not just for relief of charley horses. Stretching helps with back pains and those who suffer from sciatica nerve pains.

For me, a charley horse is nature's way of telling me I either did it wrong, or did too much. Heck, in my case, it is probably both. Lately, I have been naming the charley horses so they are easier to identify in the Preakness.●

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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