

## HEALTH

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## TCM: muscle cramps

A cramp is a sudden tightening and shortening of the muscles, and can be painful. They can occur after long periods of inactivity, as well as after over-exertion and dehydration. Dehydration often means the body does not have enough electrolytes (sodium, potassium or chloride) required by cells to help the flow of water molecules across cell membranes.

The lack of these electrolytes causes the muscles to shorten and tighten. For occasional cramps, self-care measures such as stretching properly, keeping well hydrated, regular massages and eating foods with potassium, such as bananas and fresh vegetables, will minimise the attacks.

Frequent or severe cramps in situations such as pregnancy, neuromuscular disorders with unbalanced diets, or when taking certain medications, should be treated by a medical practitioner.

In TCM, white peony root and liquorice root invigorate the liver and spleen, and improve blood supply to tendons and muscles.

Numbness can be alleviated with angelica root and astragalus root, oyster shell and turtle shell suppress the hyperactive muscles; gambir vine stem and chrysanthemum relieve dizziness; while aconite root and cassia twig promote warmth in the limbs.

Acupuncture can relax muscles and

improve circulation of blood to the affected area. The bladder meridian runs across the back of the legs, on which the acupoints *cheng shan* (centre of calf muscle) and *wei zhong* (fossa at the back of the knee) are often selected as the major stimulating points. *Yang ling quan* and *zu san li* (outer and lower side of the knees) are important points for strengthening tendons and bones.

Regular massage of these points is beneficial in preventing night cramps. Hot ginger compresses applied to the area are also useful. Compresses help dispel cold, stimulate circulation and relieve stagnation by moving *chi*.

During an attack, it's better to alleviate tense or tight muscles with heat and soothe sore muscles with cold.

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