How to Stop Cramping

by Dr. Jessica Seaton

It’s a balmy evening, you’re in the pool. It’s your first really good work-out in a while. The coach gives you a kicking set and you take off. Suddenly, in the middle of the pool, your foot cramps! You are forced to stop and deal with your cramping foot.... And your work-out been going so well!

Many swimmers are plagued with cramping problems. Most commonly the feet or calves cramp, although the quadriceps or hamstrings may occasionally also be involved. The problem can occur whether or not one is in shape, but more commonly occur when people are getting back into shape. That is why we tend to see more people standing on the side of the lane, in agony, grabbing their feet or calves, during the early season in winter or in spring.

The most common causes for swimming-related cramps are the following:

DEHYDRATION: Living in a warm, dry climate such as Southern California, we more conscientious about keeping our bodies adequately hydrated. This means drinking fluids before, during, and after our work-outs. Our bodies continue to perspire while in the water. Some people lose more fluids than others, and therefore also require more water. Treatment: You should be sure to have replacement fluids by the side of the pool even during a one hour work-out. If you drink enough before you swim, you much during practice, and won't have a "water belly."

FATIGUE:

As the muscles fatigue, there is an increased tendency for the exact mechanism of why this is so is still being debated in the scientific literature. Suffice it to say that anecdotally swimmers have reported fewer cramps as they get in better shape and when they incorporate a good stretching routine.

Treatment

- Consistent training: for most Masters swimmers that is about 3-5 times per week.
- Stretching exercises for the lower extremities (quadriceps muscles, hamstrings, calves, feet). These should be performed daily, and especially before swimming.

ELECTROLYTE DEFICIENCIES:
While most of us who eat properly are meeting the daily requirements for nutrients, including electrolytes, it is possible that our intake is not sufficient for the amount and type of exercise we perform. The most commonly implicated electrolytes are potassium, calcium, and magnesium.

Treatment:

- Eat one banana per day. Bananas are high in potassium and easy to eat on the run.
- Eat foods rich in calcium and magnesium, such as dairy products and green leafy vegetables. You may also consider a calcium/magnesium supplement.
- You may be helped by an electrolyte replacement drink during practice.

Those are the most common reasons most swimmers experience muscle cramps. Some people are more sensitive to cold water and find that it causes them to cramp. Aside from swimming in warmer water, it may help to do a more vigorous dry land warm up, including stretching, prior to swimming. Also, allow yourself time to acclimatize to the cold water by swimming at a moderate consistent pace and not sprinting until your body has adapted to the cold.

Once the muscle is cramping, about the only things you can do is to stretch it and massage it until it relaxes and lets go. Some people find that icing the muscle helps as well.

It is important to remember that if leg cramps persist, one should definitely see a medical doctor. There may be some serious underlying disorder, such as vascular disorders, and others, that may be causing the cramps. Those conditions can only be diagnosed with a serious work-up.