

# What's the Evidence for Treatment of Muscle Cramps?

*Quinine is modestly effective, but the FDA warns against its use.*

Many relatively healthy people experience painful muscle cramps, especially nighttime cramps that involve the lower legs. To determine whether effective evidence-based treatments exist for muscle cramps, researchers prepared this review for the American Academy of Neurology. They identified 24 published studies of treatment for muscle cramps that were not caused by myopathies, pregnancy, or other identifiable medical conditions.

Stretching exercises were not beneficial in the one randomized trial in which this intervention was examined. In 13 trials, quinine derivatives were modestly effective. However, because of safety concerns, quinine is not approved for treatment of cramps in the U.S. Single controlled studies of vitamin B complex and diltiazem showed some benefit, but the trials were small (only 28 and 13 patients, respectively) and the results have not been replicated. Small studies have shown vitamin E and magnesium to be ineffective.

**Comment:** According to this review, quinine is the only intervention with some evidence-based efficacy for treatment of cramps, but the FDA has warned against prescribing it for cramps; nonetheless, some patients drink tonic water — which contains quinine — for this purpose. But for now, when patients ask for advice on how to treat muscle cramps, the honest answer is that we have no good answer.

— [Allan S. Brett, MD](#)

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