STOP THAT CRAMP!

4 causes -- and solutions -- for muscle cramps during exercise

June 17, 2004 - You're beating the heat with a swimming workout, when suddenly, in the middle of the pool, your foot cramps. Ouch!

Cramping problems plague many swimmers. According to Jessica Seaton, D.C., a chiropractic orthopedist and chair of the United States Masters Swimming (USMS) sports medicine committee, cramping most commonly involves the feet or calves, although the quadriceps or hamstrings are sometimes affected.

"Muscle cramps can occur whether or not one is in shape, but it's more common when people are getting back into shape," Seaton said. "That's 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 spring or summer."

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

1. Dehydration: Our bodies continue to perspire while in the water. Some people lose more fluids than others, and therefore also require more water.

Treatment:
* Be conscientious about keeping your body adequately hydrated. This means drinking fluids before, during and after workouts.
* Be sure to have replacement fluids by the side of the pool, even during short workouts.

2. Fatigue: As the muscles fatigue, there is an increased tendency for cramping, although the exact mechanism is still being debated. Suffice it to say that anecdotally, swimmers report fewer cramps as they get in better
shape and when they incorporate a good **stretching** routine.

Treatment:
* Consistent training: Everyone's different, but for most swimmers, that is three to five times per week.
* **Stretching** exercises for the lower extremities (quadriceps, hamstrings, calves, feet) should be performed daily, and especially before swimming.

3. Electrolyte Deficiencies: Most people who eat properly meet daily requirements for nutrients, including electrolytes, but sometimes 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.
* Try drinking an electrolyte replacement beverage during practice.

4. Swimming in Cold Water: Though less common, some people are sensitive to cold water and find that it causes them to cramp.

Treatment:
* Swim in warmer water.
* Do a more vigorous dry-land warm-up, including **stretching**, prior to swimming.
* Allow yourself time to acclimate to cold water by swimming at a moderate, consistent pace and not sprinting until your body has adapted.

"Once a muscle is cramping, about the only thing you can do is to stretch it and massage it until it relaxes and lets go," Seaton said. "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. Serious underlying disorders, such as vascular disorders or other problems, may be causing the cramps.

Jessica Seaton, D.C., is a chiropractic orthopedist in private practice in West Los Angeles, Calif. She chairs the United States Masters Swimming (USMS) Sports Medicine Committee, and she has been swimming with the West Hollywood Aquatics Masters group for more than 10 years. She can be reached at 310-470-0282 or Jseaton@aol.com.

United States Masters Swimming (www.usms.org) programs are open to all adult swimmers (fitness, triathlete, competitive, non-competitive) age 18 and over who are dedicated to improving their fitness through swimming and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Founded in 1970, USMS is organized with more than 1,100 workout groups and teams throughout the nation.
(end)