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Cramps

Naturally, muscle fibres are designed to contract or lengthen in response to the neural stimulation of a desire to move (conscious or unconscious). A cramp occurs when the muscle contracts with great intensity and stays contracted, often feeling hard or bulging – and the muscle is unable to lengthen or relax. Cramps often occur in skeletal muscles, in particular effecting muscles in the foot and in the calf. Such muscle cramps are quite common and may be eased by slowly stretching the muscle, encouraging it to relax and lengthen.

There are numerous reasons why cramps may occur including; muscle fatigue, heavy exercise, poor circulation, dehydration, reduced levels of potassium, magnesium and/or calcium in the body, medications, pregnancy, and they may be symptoms of more serious conditions like intermittent claudication (a form of atherosclerosis that reduces blood flow to the legs), hypothyroidism, alcoholism, kidney failure and/or other metabolic conditions.

There are a number of things that when implemented together can reduce the likelihood of experiencing cramps. Ensuring adequate intake of water and minerals in the diet will help. Likewise ensuring adequate stretching prior to and after engaging in physical activity will help release built up tension in active muscles (i.e. calf stretches before and after running), encouraging the muscle body to relax and lengthen fully. Yoga can be a wonderful support to any physical activity that is demanding of the body as it teaches the individual how to stretch the muscle groups appropriately. Regular massage may also be of benefit.

Just the other day I had a student in class whose foot kept cramping whenever he went into adho mukha Virasana and Balasana. After class we talked about the different things that can increase the risk of cramping – hydration, diet (minerals including, potassium and magnesium) and explored the type of activity he did. He was often on his feet, walking around, but he very rarely stretched the muscles through the top of his foot back out. We talked about what a cramp was and the benefits of stretching.

I encouraged him to stretch out the top of his foot several times during the day, just to encourage the muscles to begin to relax and lengthen. He agreed to start by pointing his toes and stretching out the top of his foot whilst standing, or sitting watching TV, and then as his comfort level

grew, I encouraged him to begin practising Balasana (to again lengthen and strengthen the relevant muscles).

If the cramping were to continue and become more severe, it might be indicative of something more serious, so a referral for medical assessment would be important.

The student is continuing to come to class weekly, in which we practise a 20minute relaxation and different pranayama exercises each week. It might turn out to be of benefit to for him to try practising some of these at home, to assist him to relax more fully.