



If cramp strikes, try to relax, flip over on your back and swim down the lane, focusing on floppy ankles

# Cramping Your Style

Many of you will experience cramp during swimming. But what causes it and, more importantly, how can you cure it? **Nicola Joyce** finds out



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**Y**ou're part-way through a pool session and have just pushed off from the wall. Suddenly your feet are overwhelmed by cramp. Your toes take on a life of their own, your calves ache and you feel unable to carry on. It's a familiar scenario. But how can such a little thing cause so much pain? And, more importantly, how can you stop it happening in the first place?

When we swim, to an extent, we tend to point our toes. This is helpful in that it

## Jargon Buster

**Plantar flexing** The action of extending and flexing the ankle by using the underside of the foot and back of the ankle.

**Potassium** An important mineral present in many foods. Maintaining the correct level in the diet is thought to help avoid muscle cramp.

exposes a greater area to the water when we push down in the kick. However, if your ankles aren't flexible, this plantar flexing action can cause tension to run from the toes to the back of the lower leg, resulting in that painful cramping sensation.

Kick-work and wearing fins can exacerbate the problem, as can the explosive movement used to push off the wall. These actions are even more likely to cause muscle tension if you're tired, dehydrated, tense or suffering from nutritional imbalances.

Many of us train more than once a day. If you've already completed a sweaty bike or run, it's imperative that you hydrate yourself fully before hitting the pool. Try a sports drink with electrolyte or watered-down fruit juice (orange juice has good levels of potassium). Foods high in potassium are thought to stave off cramp, so try a banana, avocado, dried fruit, seeds or plain nuts. You don't need to eat many.

If cramp still strikes, the only way to get rid of it is to flex the ankles and loosen the area up. Relax (feeling tense will only add to the problem) and try lying on your back, looking at the ceiling, and kicking your way up the



## Stop cramp!

Take an electrolyte drink or watered-down fruit juice to the pool, place it on the poolside and make sure you sip from it every time you stop. Boost your hydration levels beforehand and try eating a potassium-rich food, such as a banana, unsalted nuts or dried fruit.

lane. Really think about having relaxed, floppy ankles. Swimmers tend to have much looser ankles than those from a running or biking background. But if you're not a natural swimmer, spend time at home working on ankle flexibility and strength by writing the alphabet with your toes, or moving them in large circles both clockwise and anti-clockwise. As well as preventing cramp, improved ankle flexibility will boost your swimming in the long-term. **E20**