



A cure for cramp?



Mike Alexander shares his tips for reducing the risk of cramp in swimrun

Run up a steep mountain, swim across a cold lake, run down the other side of the mountain, swim across another lake: beautiful, challenging, adventurous. What could possibly go wrong? Well, cramp could put an end to your swimrun fun. Let's take a look at what causes cramp and how you might prevent it.

WHAT CAUSES CRAMP?

The evidence is inconclusive. There's a large school of thought that suggests it's down to dehydration and loss of electrolytes. However, the science doesn't fully back this up. There's another suggestion that temperature and overloading muscles when fatigued can both play a part. The most scientific evidence points towards failure of some type of cramp-

inhibiting reflex in the spinal column, described as neuromuscular theory by Serajul Khan and John Burne of the University of Sydney in Australia.

What causes you to cramp may also be specific to the individual so testing your body in training is key. I personally find if I keep my electrolytes topped up, I don't suffer from cramp. I know other people whose legs cramp up if they start kicking hard towards the end of a long swim.

HOW TO AVOID CRAMP

Although the science is not clear, general advice is to eat foods that

Mike Alexander is one of the most experienced swimrun athletes in the UK and a Level 2 Open Water Coach and Mountain Leader. For more knowledge from the field, gear demo, and a mini-swimrun, check out Mike's Introduction to Swimrun Workshop. weswimrun.org/workshop



contain potassium – a mineral that helps your body break down carbohydrates and build muscle. Suggestions: dried fruits, tomato juice, citrus juice, milk, melon, orange and banana. Drink a lot of water too. It maintains circulation and helps flush cramp-causing waste products from your muscles. It's definitely worth testing which foods work for you in your training schedule.

During most races, the food stations are normally sufficiently stocked with enough of the right stuff to see you through to the end. You should also carry some emergency snacks such as jelly-babies or an energy gel, and an electrolyte supplement. Experiment on your longer training efforts with what supplements work for you.

Strength training and plyometric warm-up exercises have also been suggested as a preventative measure.

Swimrun specific gear such as pull buoys and calf guards lend themselves well to avoiding cramp as they give your legs a chance to rest during the swims. The compression and warming effect of calf guards may also help.

WHY ELECTROLYTES ARE IMPORTANT

Electrolytes are important because cells use them to transmit electrical impulses across their membranes and to other cells throughout the body. These electrical charges regulate nerve impulses, heart functions and muscle

contractions. If you drink excessive water while losing electrolytes through sweat, there is a risk of hyponatraemia as well as cramp. It may therefore be useful to replace lost electrolytes.

You can make your own electrolyte drink or buy it – a range of products is available, from dissolvable tablets you drop in your water bottle to capsules you swallow with water.

SUGAR ALERT

Many sports drinks contain carbohydrates as well as electrolytes. While this can be an essential energy source, drinking too much can leave your stomach feeling bloated. Moreover, drinking more to try to replace electrolytes can mess with your carbohydrate intake and result in taking in too much sugar at one time, causing your stomach to actually slow down the rate it delivers glycogen to your working muscles. There are zero-sugar electrolyte drinks out there so don't overlook them.

DEALING WITH CRAMP

If cramp still happens, gently stretch the affected muscle. If you are racing with a partner they can help. If you are in the water, lie on your back, lift the affected leg and stretch as much as you can, your partner is really useful here, or a safety boat may assist. Gentle massage may also help.

Cramps can be really debilitating. Hopefully the advice here will help you avoid them 🙏

MAKE YOUR OWN ENERGY AND ELECTROLYTE DRINK



1 1/2 cup fresh orange juice



1 1/4 cup fresh lemon juice



1 tbsp honey



1 1/2 tsp sea salt

Mix with 2 cups of water.

Or the simple budget version:

Mix water, a little sugar (or cordial) and salt in your water bottle.



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