Chances are that at one time or another, you have felt a sudden, painful cramp in your leg. This is sometimes called a muscle knot, or a “charley horse.” If you’ve experienced this, you’re not alone—leg cramps are common, and about 70% of people over age 50 get them. Medically, they are called nocturnal leg cramps.

What Are Nocturnal Leg Cramps?
Nocturnal leg cramps are usually felt in the calf muscles or the soles of the feet, and can last anywhere from a few seconds to as long as 10 minutes. Leg cramps can vary greatly—they can be mild or more serious, and can occur once in a while, or even every day. If your leg cramps are more serious, your quality of life can be affected. Since these cramps usually occur at night, they can make it difficult to sleep and cause you to be tired during the day.

Are You at Risk for Nocturnal Leg Cramps?
Although the exact cause of nocturnal leg cramps is not known and many people of all ages and from all walks of life experience them, some people are more likely than others to get them. In fact, nocturnal leg cramps occur most often in women and older people.

Pregnant women and people who are on hemodialysis, a medical treatment for end-stage liver disease, also experience leg cramps more than others. Some diseases and conditions can also cause leg cramps, including peripheral vascular disease (PVD), arthritis, diabetes, Parkinson’s disease, disorders of the thyroid (one of the body’s glands) or nerves, and low levels of calcium, potassium, or magnesium in the blood.

Heavy exercise, dehydration, flat feet, and standing or sitting for long periods of time can also cause leg cramps in some people.

Talk With Your Healthcare Provider About Your Symptoms
If your nocturnal leg cramps are severe, talk with your healthcare provider—he or she may be able to recommend lifestyle changes and/or medication that can help. Make sure to tell your healthcare provider about all of your symptoms, as well as any other medical conditions that you may have. (Sometimes, treating these other conditions, or changing a medication that you are currently taking, can help to lessen cramps, or even make them go away.) This information will help your healthcare provider to rule out other conditions that have symptoms that are similar to those of nocturnal leg cramps, such as restless legs syndrome or muscle strain.

REFERENCES:
Restless legs syndrome and other sleep-related leg disorders. Available at: http://www.mdconsult.com/.