

Q: I get frequent very painful leg spasms on long flights. As a semi-pro baseball player in my teens and early 20s back in the 1950s, I got them often. They were charley horses, and we worked them out by jumping around and stamping our feet. Sometimes, if we caught the pain soon enough, they'd last only a few seconds, but if they happened when we were asleep or crammed into a tight space, we'd get the full spasm hit of from five to ten minutes.

They were painful as hell then, and the ones I get now on long flights are even more so because of my age. They're worse if I'm in a five-across seat for eight hours. I'm six foot two, but is it my fault the seats are so close together? What can I do to prevent in-flight charley horses, or at least ease the pain?



A: First, before you fly, check with your doctor for advice and possible prescriptions. As we age, our muscles stiffen, blood supply slows down and arteries tend to clog. What you call a charley horse can be anything from a minor muscle spasm to a temporary blood clot to a serious embolism.

On long flights, while sitting in a cramped position, these ailments are most likely to happen, especially to people age 55 and up. The best solution is to take your doc's advice on diet, exercise and, if prescribed, take medications that reduce the risk of charley horses or worse. There are some over-the-counter pills containing quinine that may offer relief. Drinking fizzy soda containing quinine can help, too.

If you can do it financially, book higher-class seats with more leg room. At your height, tourist class will always be uncomfortable. However, no matter where you're seated on long flights, get up and exercise at least once every half hour for five minutes. Go to the back of the aircraft where there's room to stretch your legs, arms and back.

The worst scenario will be that a charley horse strikes without warning while you're cramped in your tourist class seat. Unbuckle, stand up and stamp your legs. If possible, get out of your seat and into the aisle to do exercise your legs until the pain subsides in a minute or two. You may get some funny looks from other passengers, but it's better than staying seated and suffering silently for five or ten minutes.