SYMPTOM

Muscle aches

Muscle aches are soreness, tenderness, or pain felt in one or more muscles.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Achy, sore, tender, tight, or heavy muscles

WHERE IT IS FELT
One area or muscles throughout the body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Unaccustomed exercise, minor strains, viral infections

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Dark urine or marked weakness with severe muscle pain

USUALLY LASTS
Days after exertion; longer when illness or injury persists

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain lasts several weeks, worsens, or limits daily activities

Overview

Muscle aches are pain, soreness, or tenderness in the muscles. The medical term is myalgia . Aches may affect one area, such as the back or thigh, or many parts of the body at once.

Muscle pain often follows unfamiliar exercise, repeated movement, or a minor strain. It can also occur during infections such as flu. Less often, ongoing or severe aches are related to a medicine, hormone problem, inflammatory condition, or significant muscle injury.

The location, timing, and other symptoms can help narrow down the cause. Muscle aches are a symptom rather than a diagnosis.

What it may feel or look like

A muscle may feel dull, sore, burning, cramped, tight, or heavy. It may hurt only when you move or press it, or it may ache while you are resting.

Other features can include:

Pain and weakness are not the same. Pain may make you avoid using a muscle. True weakness means the muscle cannot produce its usual force, such as when you cannot rise from a chair or

lift an arm normally.

- Stiffness or reduced movement
- Tenderness when the muscle is touched
- Mild swelling after a strain
- Tiredness, fever, or headache during an infection
- Weakness that makes usual tasks difficult

Common causes

Common causes include delayed-onset muscle soreness , which develops after exercise that is harder or different from your usual activity. Minor strains and overuse can cause more focused pain. Poor sleep, muscle tension, and holding one position for a long time may add to soreness.

Viral infections, including flu, can cause widespread aching along with tiredness, fever, cough, or other infection symptoms.

Less common causes include side effects from medicines, an underactive thyroid, fibromyalgia, and inflammatory conditions affecting muscles or nearby tissues. New aching and morning stiffness around both shoulders or hips in an adult over 50 can have a specific inflammatory cause and should be assessed.

Rare but urgent causes include severe muscle breakdown, called rhabdomyolysis . This may follow extreme exertion, overheating, a crush injury, a seizure, or certain medicines. A deep infection or dangerous pressure inside an injured limb can also cause severe muscle pain.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if muscle pain occurs with chest pressure, serious trouble breathing, fainting, new confusion, or sudden inability to move part of your body.

Seek urgent same-day care if you have:

These signs do not confirm a particular condition, but they need prompt assessment.

Arrange a routine appointment if the aches keep returning, continue for several weeks, steadily worsen, disturb sleep, or limit daily activities. Also book an appointment if they began after starting or changing a medicine, or if you have ongoing weakness, joint swelling, unexplained weight loss, or prolonged morning stiffness.

- Severe muscle pain or weakness with dark, tea-coloured urine
- Much less urine than usual after intense exercise, overheating, or injury
- A rapidly swelling, firm, very painful limb
- Fever with a red, hot, swollen, or increasingly painful area
- Severe pain after a major injury
- New calf swelling or pain with shortness of breath

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask where the pain is, when it began, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about exercise, injuries, recent infections, sleep, work activities, medicines, and alcohol or drug use.

During an examination, they may check tenderness, swelling, joint movement, reflexes, and muscle strength. This helps separate muscle soreness from problems involving joints, nerves, bones, or blood flow.

Tests are not always needed for short-lived aches with a clear cause. When symptoms are severe, unexplained, or persistent, blood tests may check kidney function, thyroid function, inflammation, or creatine kinase . Creatine kinase is an enzyme that can rise when muscle tissue is damaged. A urine test may be used when muscle breakdown is suspected. Imaging is usually reserved for a suspected injury or another specific problem.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Mild post-exercise soreness or a minor strain often improves with relative rest. Avoid the activity that triggered the pain, but keep moving gently if you can do so without making it worse. Returning to normal activity gradually may prevent further strain.

A wrapped cold pack can help a recent painful strain. Heat may feel better for tightness or longer-lasting soreness. Protect your skin from direct ice or excessive heat.

Sleep, regular meals, and enough fluids can support recovery, especially during a mild infection or after exercise. Stretching should feel gentle rather than painful. Forceful stretching or intense massage may worsen an acute injury.

Non-prescription pain medicines may help some people. Follow the product label and ask a

pharmacist whether a medicine is suitable if you are pregnant, take blood thinners like warfarin or apixaban , or have kidney disease, liver disease, or a history of stomach ulcers.

If aches began after a prescribed medicine, contact the prescriber or pharmacist. Do not stop an important medicine, such as a cholesterol-lowering statin like atorvastatin or simvastatin , without advice unless you are being treated for an emergency.

What to expect

Post-exercise soreness usually appears within a day or two and then settles over the next several days. A mild strain may take longer, particularly if the area is repeatedly stressed.

Aches linked to a viral infection often improve as the illness clears. Symptoms caused by a medicine or an ongoing health condition may continue until the cause is identified and managed.

Resume exercise in stages once daily movement is comfortable and strength is returning. Pain that persists, repeatedly returns, or changes in character deserves routine medical review.

Common questions

Is muscle soreness after exercise normal?

Mild soreness after unfamiliar or demanding exercise is common. It should gradually improve. Severe pain, marked swelling, true weakness, or dark urine is not typical post-exercise soreness and needs urgent assessment.

Can stress cause muscle aches?

Stress can lead to muscle tension, reduced sleep, jaw clenching, or changes in posture. These may contribute to aching, especially around the neck, shoulders, and back. Persistent pain should not automatically be assumed to come from stress.

Could my medicine be causing the pain?

Some medicines can contribute to muscle symptoms. The timing matters, including whether symptoms started after a new medicine or dose change. Ask the prescriber or a pharmacist to review your medicines rather than stopping them on your own.

Should I exercise while my muscles hurt?

Gentle movement is often reasonable for mild soreness. Avoid heavy exercise involving an injured or very painful muscle. Stop and seek advice if activity causes sharp pain, worsening weakness, major swelling, or dark urine.

Sources

- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Muscle aches , U.S. National Library of Medicine
- NHS: Sprains and strains , National Health Service
- CDC/NIOSH: About Rhabdomyolysis , Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- CDC: Signs and Symptoms of Flu , Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- American College of Rheumatology: Polymyalgia Rheumatica , patient information resource