

What to do about side stitches?

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Quite a few runners have complained to me about having abdominal cramps (a.k.a. "side stitches") in a workout or race. So I decided to briefly revisit this topic. Those stabbing pains are not pathologic but can be very annoying and can essentially ruin your intention to run a good race. How to avoid or minimize chance of getting them? Here are a few tips based on some cumulative runner's wisdom (and some research too):



Pre-race and racing tips:

- Hydrate since morning. Cramps are more common in morning races because kids do not bother to drink or eat after waking up. Body moves its fluids more effectively on the run when it is well-hydrated. But do not drink too much right before the race.

- Avoid sugary drinks for pre-race hydration. Research showed that drinking fruit juice or sweetened sport drinks before race increase the probability of getting stomach cramps compared to water or no drink at all. Save those sweet drinks for post-race energy replenishment.

- Have a healthy and light breakfast (2 hour before race). Soft oatmeal is the best, but also some banana, bagels or waffles, non-fat yogurt would work. Avoid extra protein (unless you eat 3-4 hours before), milk, fatty foods, or extra fiber. Food eaten too close to the race can cause cramps in the left side of the stomach.

- Warm up well. Very often cramps occur when kids start running too fast out of the gate. So a good warmup - jogging 5-10 min, doing stretches, drills, and some accelerations - allow more gradual adjustment to exercise intensity. If it is chilly out, keep moving before start.

- Mid-body stretching sometimes helps - during warm-up add exercises such as trunk rolls, body twists, side leans and stretches etc.

- Run smooth downhill - downhill are known to cause cramps more likely due to excessive bouncing. There is a hypothesis that because abdominal muscles are not very strong in young kids, up-and-down bouncing pulls abdominal organs downward and causes irritation to the tissue and ligaments holding stomach. So runners need to keep smooth stride downhill, especially early in the race.

- Deeper inhaling/exhaling. If cramp is happening, sometimes slowing down a bit and "breathing through it" with some light massage of the hurting side helps to ease it up. Also some sources advise to exhale when landing on one's left foot (if cramp is on the right), but I did not test this myself.

General advice:

- Improve fitness of core (abdominal) muscles - we try to do that throughout the season including exercises for ab and spine muscles in our core sessions.

- Practice abdominal breathing - inhale expanding your stomach and exhale pulling it in. Repeat slowly 10 times. Practice every day during warm-up. This activity teaches abdominal muscles engage in breathing patterns and handle physical activity with less stress.

Finally, more trained runners get cramps much less frequently, so run more and you will find your way around them.

I wish everyone no cramps this weekend!

-Coach Mark

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