

NBA finals: King James no stranger to cramps

By Doug Smith | Sports Reporter

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SAN ANTONIO—Cramping is an issue that's dogged LeBron James for a decade now; he takes the liquids and swallows the pills and does whatever he's told to do and every now and then it gets to be too much.

And as he lay on the court at the AT&T Center in the dying minutes of Game 1 of the NBA finals, basically unable to move, it was as if an old enemy had come to visit at the most inopportune time.

“Basically, my body said, ‘OK, enough jumping for you for the night, you’ve had enough,’” James said Friday, about 18 hours after his cramp-induced departure played such a significant role in the Miami Heat’s [110-95 loss](#) to the San Antonio Spurs to open the league championship series. “Nothing I could do about it.”

It wasn’t for lack of trying, though.

James said he drank as many liquids as he could (“I mean, I hydrated as much as I could to the point where your stomach feels like it just can’t take any more,” he said), changed his sweat-soaked uniform at halftime, and iced down his neck and body as frequently as possible. Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said James took “seven cramping pills” in a failed attempt to head off the issue.

But James said he knew early in the game that trouble was afoot.

“I noticed it in warmups . . . I actually sat on the scorer’s table for 10 minutes and stopped warming up, so I could cool down a little bit,” he said.

“I really started to feel it in the second quarter and I never really change my uniform, but at halftime I changed my whole uniform and in the third quarter I came out with, I believe, eight minutes to go in the third.

And I usually play the whole third quarter, so I knew the conditions was a little extreme for me personally.”

Unfortunately for James, the answer isn't as simple as taking a chug of some sponsor-prescribed Powerade and even the best advice comes with a pretty big caveat: an exact theory on why cramping occurs is still elusive.

“The theory on electrolyte loss and dehydration is not conclusively proven,” says Dr. Raza Awan, a sports medicine specialist at Synergy Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation in Toronto. “There’s a lot of controversy right now in the literature.”

The most common alternative to the dehydration theory is muscle fatigue, Awan says. Simply put, too many back-to-back games with practices in between can force your muscles to involuntarily contract or cramp. “That’s why you often see it in the finals or the last 15 minutes or so of a match,” he says.

James said he has gone through a battery of tests over the years in an attempt to find out why he’s more prone to crippling cramps than many other players. None of them have come back with any conclusive answers so he’ll do what he does and hope for better timing.

It’s one thing to cramp up in some meaningless regular-season game; it’s quite something else to have it happen in the NBA finals with about three minutes left in a two-point game.

“It hasn’t happened a lot in my career, it’s just so happened it happened twice in the NBA finals and we all remember that,” said James, who added that he was sore Friday but fully expects to play in Sunday’s Game 2. “It happened in the OKC series (in 2012) and it happened last night. So, bad timing on my part.”

James was criticized by some on Friday for not playing through the pain with so much on the line. But a series of cramps — James said multiple muscles tried to shut down — for an NBA player are like nothing a regular human would endure.

“Zumba classes don’t count,” said James’ teammate Shane Battier.

Said Miami coach Erik Spoelstra: “It’s like trying to play, you know, an NBA basketball game in a hot yoga environment — it’s not ideal. We’re not making excuses for it, we’re trying to adapt on the fly and it was at an extreme level and he was competing at an extremely high level.

The only other answer would have been to pace himself, and he doesn’t have that in his DNA.”