

GOUT

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Gout signals its presence with a sudden severe pain in a joint, often at night and often at the base of the big toe. The joint becomes tender and swollen and the skin is often red and warm. The pain also worsens to the touch.

When these symptoms strike, see your doctor for a confirmation of a diagnosis. He may give you a medication to act quickly to reduce the inflammation. Take it as directed. Keep your body adequately hydrated. Dehydration can increase uric acid levels so drink extra water each day (at least 6 cups). Also keep your alcohol consumption down—no more than two standard drinks per day for men and one daily for women. Otherwise, your risk of gout symptoms increases due to a slowing of the excretion of uric acid from the kidneys.

Weight loss is good if you are overweight. This can reduce your risk of future attacks of gout. Also, discuss all your current medications with your doctor and pharmacist. Some medications have side effects that can cause gout symptoms. An example is some diuretics (“water pills”) can increase uric acid levels which will warrant a change to a different diuretic.

What causes gout?

Gout is an intensely painful form of arthritis that is very treatable once the diagnosis is confirmed. It is also called hyperuricemia, an inflammatory arthritis caused by too much uric acid crystals in the joints and tissues. Our bodies produce uric acid normally through the breakdown of purines. Purines are substances found naturally in the body and in certain foods (see sidebar on p.2).

Normally, uric acid isn't a problem. It is dissolved in the blood and excreted in the urine like so many other chemicals our body doesn't need. However, sometimes there is an excess of uric acid and your kidneys can't get rid of it all so uric acid crystals will start to build up in certain joints and tissues resulting in pain, swelling and inflammation. The classic picture of gout, one that is often seen in movies, is that of a red, swollen big toe, but it can occur in your feet, ankles, knees, hands and wrists.

An acute attack of gout, if untreated, usually lasts about ten days to two weeks when the pain and swelling subside.

Who is at risk of developing gout? Those people who eat a diet rich in purines are more at risk of developing gout. Those who are overweight, have high cholesterol, drink too much alcohol, or have diabetes or high blood pressure also are more susceptible to gout. Gout also runs in the family so there can be a hereditary cause.

Besides diet, certain medications can cause gout. Certain diuretics (like hydrochlorothiazide), niacin (especially when taken in high doses for cholesterol reduction), A.S.A (even the low dose type), cyclosporin, a transplant anti-rejection drug and others. If you receive a new prescription, our Medicine Centre pharmacists will inform you of any pertinent side effects you should be aware of.

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FACTS ABOUT GOUT: LIFESTYLE & DIETARY

- Once called “the disease of kings” (like Henry VIII) because overindulgences with food and drink.
- Gout is linked with other medical conditions like high blood pressure, increased cholesterol levels, obesity and diabetes.
- Other risk factors include heavy alcohol intake, poor kidney function and a low thyroid condition.
- There is a genetic aspect to gout. It seems to run in some families.
- Gout is nine times more common in men (usually between the ages of 40 and 50). Women may experience the disease after menopause when their uric acid levels rise naturally.

DIET INVOLVES AVOIDING FOODS CONTAINING PURINE.

These include:

- Beer and other beverages containing alcohol
- Anchovies, sardines in oil, salmon, fish roes and herring
- Organ meat (liver, kidney, sweetbreads)
- Legumes (dried beans and peas)
- Meat extracts (consommé, gravies etc)
- Yeast
- Mushrooms, spinach, asparagus, cauliflower

SO WHAT CAN YOU EAT?

A balanced diet:

- high in complex carbohydrates (whole grains, fruits, vegetables).
- low in protein with 15% of calories from soy, lean meats and poultry.
- containing no more than 30% of calories from fat (10% from animal fat).

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT:

Gout is usually suspected when the patient complains of suffering from many attacks of intense pain at the base of the toes or in the ankles or knees. Luckily, gout usually attacks only one joint at a time. Diagnosis can be determined by withdrawing a sample of fluid from an inflamed joint. If the microscopic examination of the fluid reveals shiny, needle-like crystals, these are most likely uric acid crystals and gout is confirmed.

A blood test that measures the uric acid level in the blood can also help to diagnose gout although this isn't a total confirmation because some people have high uric acid levels but no gout symptoms. The converse is also true. Some people have gout symptoms but low uric acid levels.

Doctors can also request a lab test to measure the amount of uric acid being excreted through the kidneys. Once a firm diagnosis is made, there are two main avenues of drug treatment available.

TREATMENT OF GOUT:

If a patient is experiencing an acute attack of gout, doctors will recommend non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like *ibuprofen* which is available over-the counter. This class of drugs works well but does carry the risk of stomach upset, bleeding and ulcers. *Acetaminophen* can also be used but this drug has little anti-inflammatory effect. A full-blown attack can also be treated with a short-term course of *colchicine* which works very well but also has intestinal side effects of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Doctors may also choose steroid medications by injection or orally for short-term use when a patient's medical condition won't allow for the prescribing of NSAID medication.

There are also many stronger NSAIDs available only on prescription that doctors will sometimes prescribe for acute attacks of gout. These include *diclofenac* and *indomethacin* which can be given for a short time then tapered off once the attack subsides.

When gout attacks occur often throughout the year, the drug *allopurinol* (Zyloprim®) is often used to prevent the attacks. It actually blocks uric acid production in the body. It works well but should be used with caution in patients who have kidney problems. It is also one of those medications that has a frequent risk of skin rash as a side effect. It can also affect certain elements in the blood but these abnormalities can be picked up through regular blood tests. Other side effects include upset stomach and headache. The dose of allopurinol is once daily.

SUMMARY:

Gout can be a very painful and often debilitating disease. However the medications used to treat gout are very effective and when combined with certain lifestyle changes, there will be excellent outcomes.