

Gout

Gout causes attacks of pain and swelling in one or more joints. A short course of an anti-inflammatory painkiller will usually ease an attack quickly. If gout attacks recur, you may be advised to take allopurinol each day to prevent attacks.

What is gout?

Gout causes attacks of painful inflammation in one or more joints. The pain can be severe. It affects about 1 in 200 adults. Men are more commonly affected than women. A first attack of gout typically develops in middle age, but it sometimes occurs in younger people.

What causes gout?

Gout is caused by a chemical in the blood called uric acid (urate). Uric acid is usually harmless, and is made in the body from certain foods. It is passed out with the urine. The amount of uric acid in the blood builds up in some people. From time to time the level may become too high. When the level of uric acid becomes high tiny grit-like crystals of uric acid may form. The crystals typically collect in a joint. This causes inflammation, swelling, and pain - a gout attack.

Note: some people have a high level of uric acid but do not form crystals or have gout. Also, rarely, some people with a normal level of uric acid have gout attacks. However, as a rule, the higher the level of uric acid, the greater the chance of forming crystals and developing gout.

In most cases there is no apparent reason for the build up of uric acid. In some people, the build up of uric acid may have a known cause. For example:

- If you drink too much alcohol it can cause uric acid to build up.
- Some medicines such as diuretics ('water tablets'), low dose aspirin, and some used as chemotherapy for cancer may raise the level of uric acid.
- More uric acid is made than usual in illnesses where the cells of the body have a rapid turnover. For example, severe psoriasis and some blood disorders.
- Certain foods may 'tip the balance' to raise your uric acid higher than normal. In particular, eating heart, herring, sardines, or mussels frequently may increase the level of uric acid. However, eating a normal balanced diet should not have much effect on the uric acid level.

What are the symptoms of gout?

Gout usually occurs in 'attacks'. An attack typically develops quickly over a few hours. It usually causes severe pain in one joint. The base of the big toe is the most commonly affected joint. Walking can be very painful and even the weight of bedclothes can hurt.

However, any joint can be affected. Sometimes two or more joints are affected. Affected joints usually swell, and the nearby skin may look red and inflamed. If left untreated, a gout attack may last several days, but usually goes completely within 7-10 days. Less severe attacks can occur which may be mistaken at first for other forms of arthritis. Weeks, months or even years may go by between attacks. Some people only ever have one attack.

Is gout serious?

Although a gout attack can be very painful, it is uncommon to cause other problems even if it is not treated. Joint damage may occur if you have recurring attacks. In a few people, uric acid crystals form kidney stones. Sometimes the crystals form bumps (tophi) under the skin. These are usually harmless and painless, but sometimes form in awkward places such as at the end of fingers.

How is gout diagnosed?

Gout is usually diagnosed if you have the typical symptoms and a raised blood level of uric acid. If there is doubt as to the cause of the pain and swelling, your doctor may take some fluid out of a swollen joint. This is done with a needle and syringe. The fluid is looked at under the microscope. Crystals of urate (uric acid) can be seen in the fluid to confirm the diagnosis of gout.

What can I do if I have recurring gout attacks?

- If you are overweight, try to lose some weight. This can help to lower the uric acid level.
- If you drink a lot of alcohol then it may help if you reduced the amount that you drink. You do not need to stop drinking alcohol altogether, but cutting down may help if you drink a lot.
- If you are taking any medicines, check whether they are a cause of gout (see above). An alternative medicine may be available. Your doctor will advise.
- Have your blood pressure checked at least once a year. High blood pressure is more common in people with gout.

What is the treatment for a gout attack?

Ice to ease pain

An ice pack (or pack of frozen peas) held against the inflamed joint may ease the pain until the other treatments (below) start to work.

- Wrap the ice pack (or peas) in a towel to avoid direct skin contact and ice-burn.
- Apply for about 20 minutes, then stop. (It should not be applied for long periods.)
- Repeat as often as required BUT....
- Make sure the temperature of the affected part has returned to normal before applying again.

Anti-inflammatory painkillers

A short course of an anti-inflammatory painkiller will quickly ease most gout attacks (within 12-24 hours). There are several types and brands and your doctor will prescribe one. Many people with gout like to have a supply of tablets in the home on 'standby' just in case an attack occurs. They are usually needed only for a few days until the inflammation and pain go. Most people can take short courses of these tablets without any problem, although side-effects occur in some people.

Other treatments

Colchicine is an alternative medicine that eases gout attacks. It is usually only used if you have problems or side-effects with anti-inflammatory painkillers. Steroid tablets can also reduce the pain and inflammation. They are another alternative if there are problems or side-effects with anti-inflammatory painkillers or colchicine.

Can further gout attacks be prevented?

Many people only have an attack of gout every now and then. All you may need is to have some anti-inflammatory painkillers on 'standby' to treat each attack. For some people, attacks occur more often. In this situation, you can take a medicine to prevent attacks.

Allopurinol is used to prevent gout attacks

Allopurinol does not have any effect during a gout attack, and it is not a painkiller. It works by lowering the level of uric acid in the blood. It takes 2-3 months to become fully effective. You need to take it every day to keep the uric acid level normal to prevent gout attacks.

When you first take allopurinol, it can sometimes cause a gout attack. This is because it may cause the level of uric acid to rise slightly before it falls. For this reason it is not normally started during a gout attack. It is best to start it about 3-4 weeks after an attack has settled. Also, an anti-inflammatory painkiller is often prescribed for the first 2-3 months after you start allopurinol, just in

case it causes a gout attack. Once the level of uric acid has been brought down, taking allopurinol each day usually works well to prevent gout attacks.

The dose of allopurinol needed varies from person to person. Treatment is usually started with a low dose. A blood test is often done after a month or so to check that the level of uric acid has come down. If not, the dose may need to be increased. Most people end up taking about 100-300 mg each day to stop gout attacks.

If a gout attack occurs while you are taking allopurinol, you can still take an anti-inflammatory painkiller to relieve the pain. However, this may indicate that you need an increased dose of allopurinol. Side-effects are uncommon with allopurinol. If side-effects do occur, other medicines with a similar action are sometimes prescribed.

Further help and information

UK Gout Society

PO Box 527, London, WC1V 7YP

Web: www.ukgoutsociety.org

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