

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 often, you may be advised to take a medicine regularly 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 begins 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, you may form tiny grit-like crystals of uric acid. 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.
- If you eat large amounts of certain foods such as peas, beans, lentils, spinach, asparagus, anchovies, meats, poultry, meat extracts (e.g. gravy), offal, and seafood, it may tip the

balance' to raise your uric acid higher than normal.

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.

Is gout serious?

Although a gout attack can be very painful, it rarely causes other problems even if it is not treated. In a few people, uric acid crystals form kidney stones. These might damage a kidney, but this is rare. Sometimes the crystals form harmless bumps (tophi) under the skin.

What can I do if I have gout?

- If you are overweight, try to lose some weight. This can help to lower the uric acid level.
- Gout can be made worse if you drink a lot of alcohol. You do not need to stop drinking alcohol altogether, but cutting down may help.
- 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 gout attacks?

- **An anti-inflammatory painkiller** will quickly ease most gout attacks (within 12-24 hours). There are several brands and your doctor will prescribe one. Many people with gout like to have a supply of tablets 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 medicines without any problem, although side-effects occur in some people.
- **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 (Zyloprim) 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 few weeks 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 is usually very effective in preventing gout attacks.

The dose of allopurinol that is 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. 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. You are likely to have complete prevention of gout attacks whilst you take allopurinol. Should side effects occur, other medicines with a similar action are sometimes prescribed.