

# Gout



ARTHRITIS CARE

*Empowering  
people with arthritis.*

## What is gout?

Gout is a type of arthritis where swelling and severe pain develops in joints, especially at the base of the big toes.

Our bodies all have a chemical waste product called urate (or uric acid). If there is too much urate in the body, it usually passes out in our urine. Too much urate can build up and form crystals. Gout is caused when these crystals build up in and around the body's joints, causing inflammation and pain. Only about five per cent of people with high urate levels actually get gout.

### *Real life story*

**I** *I first had a gout attack when in my early 40s. It was very painful. I looked for a link with foods, but never found any correlation with purines or any other food. The most obvious link I noted at the time was with wine, particularly cheap red wine. The toe would sometimes become inflamed within an hour or two.*

*My job involved a lot of travel – long aeroplane journeys and no exercise for a few days seemed to invite trouble.*

*One big toe has become very inflexible and the joints get a little painful after a long walk but otherwise I have no other problems.*

## How will it affect me?

Gout usually affects the big toes. It can affect other joints such as ankles, knees, hands, wrists or elbows, especially in people who get gout when they are older. A joint will start to ache, then swell up and become red, hot and extremely painful.

The joint may look as if it has a boil on it, or the skin become shiny and peeling. The joint will be stiff. You might also get a temperature and feel very tired.

An attack of gout can last from one to 10 days, then die down, doing no permanent damage to the joint. There can be years between attacks. However, if you get lots of attacks (which is rare), you can develop more permanent arthritis in the joint, which can damage it (chronic gout). Chronic gout can also cause white pimples (called tophi) to appear on your skin, especially on your ears, fingers or elbows. This is where urate crystals form under the skin. They can be painful.

If your urate levels are especially high, it can build up in the kidneys as stones, so you will need treatment to reduce the levels.

**An attack of gout can be triggered:**

- if you are very tired, worried or have had an illness
- if you injure or bruise a joint. If you are prone to gout, and you have more pain in a joint than you would expect after a minor bump, it could be an attack coming on, so get treatment straight away
- by taking diuretics (water tablets) or low-dose aspirin. Some people take these for high blood pressure or to prevent heart disease
- by eating or drinking a large amount of protein or alcohol at once.



Gout can affect men of any age, including young men. It is extremely rare in women, although can develop after the menopause (after the periods stop). Taking diuretics, or water tablets, can cause an attack of gout.

Pseudogout is a similar condition to gout, where sudden attacks of inflammation affect a joint. It is caused by calcium phosphate crystals, not urate crystals, and usually affects knees, shoulders or wrists, rather than toes. It can be treated differently to gout, and is not covered by this factsheet.

**What is the treatment?****Medicines**

- Very bad (acute) attacks of gout are usually treated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These help reduce inflammation and so cut down the pain. Indometacin (Indocid) and diclofenac (Voltaren) are examples of NSAIDs. When they are used for short periods, NSAIDs are unlikely to cause side-effects, but you must always take them with or straight after food – if you take them on an empty stomach, they can cause severe stomach problems.
- Cortisone type drugs (corticosteroids) might be given to you as tablets or an injection, if an acute attack does not respond to other drugs.
- Colchicine, an old-fashioned remedy obtained from meadow saffron, works well if you can't take NSAIDs. However, it can cause diarrhoea. It is available on prescription.
- If you have more than two or three attacks, your doctor may prescribe preventative drugs to stop urate building up in your body. These medicines have to be taken every day, possibly for the rest of your life. The most common of these drugs is allopurinol. This can cause an allergic rash. Contact your doctor if this happens. Never start taking this during an acute attack of gout.

### Other treatments

- An ice-pack (or pack of frozen peas), wrapped in a cloth, can be put on the sore joint for 30 minutes, several times a day, to bring relief and reduce inflammation.
- A frame over your foot to keep bedclothes off it can relieve pain at night.

You should take NSAIDs as soon as you get a hint of an attack. It's sensible to keep a supply of medicines handy. Check the expiry dates and replace if needed.

### Who will I see?

If you think you have gout (or any kind of arthritis), see your GP. An infected joint can look the same as gout, so the doctor will need to rule that out. They might do a blood test to measure the amount of urate in your blood. They might also take some of the fluid from around a joint and get it tested to see if it contains any crystals.

It is important to discuss with your doctor not only how to treat an acute attack of gout, but also how you can do things to prevent another attack and how you can manage the condition.

If your gout is severe and keeps flaring up, your doctor may suggest you see a rheumatologist – a specialist or consultant based at a hospital. They may be able to advise on taking stronger drugs like corticosteroids.

Rheumatologists work with a healthcare team which could include:

- a nurse practitioner who can help you learn about the condition and how to live with it
- an occupational therapist who can assess whether you need any extra equipment to cope at home. For example, they might give you a frame to keep bedclothes off your feet
- a podiatrist who can assess whether you need special foot care, and advise on the right shoes or insoles.

### What can I do to help myself?

Diet can be important in controlling gout.

- If you are overweight, losing weight very gradually can help reduce the amount of urate in your blood. Don't go on a starvation diet. That can make gout worse.
- Reduce the amount of alcohol you drink. Alcohol, especially beer or wine, can make it more likely for gout to flare up.



- Drink lots of water – between 1.5 and 2.5 litres a day (six to eight glasses) to help prevent kidney stones. This can stop urate forming into crystals. Drinking five or more cups of coffee daily has been shown to increase the amount of uric acid that is excreted. For the best advice on how much water you should drink, talk with your doctor.
- Cut down on foods that contain purines. The foods with the highest amounts are: liver, offal, oily fish (herring, mackerel, sardines, fish roe, anchovies), beer, yeast and yeast extracts (like Marmite). There are other foods with purines in them – ask your doctor or nurse for a full list.
- Eat a diet low in protein and with plenty of low fat dairy products.



It is important to try to work out what brings on an attack of gout to help you prevent an occurrence.

Exercise is very important for keeping your joints moving. A physiotherapist can give you exercises that are right for you.

### **Is it hereditary?**

Yes, a tendency to get gout can be passed on if you are male, though you won't necessarily get it because a parent had it. It is a genetic disease that can affect men from their late teens onwards, and occasionally in women after the menopause. Some people don't pass enough urate or their bodies make too much – this is called hyperuricaemia.

### **Other causes**

There are other causes of gout. These include kidney disease, when the kidneys can't get rid of the uric acid very well. Some other diseases can also increase your likelihood of developing gout, including the treatment of some blood disorders such as leukaemia.

### **Where can I get more information and support?**

Arthritis Care's helpline 0808 800 4050 (weekdays 10am-4pm) plus website ([www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)) can give you information about adapting your life, treatments and care, or just give you someone to talk to. You can also contact other people with arthritis through the discussion forums on our website.

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### **Note**

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## Arthritis Care

Arthritis Care is the UK's largest voluntary organisation working with and for all people with arthritis.

Our publications are just one of the many services Arthritis Care provides. These include a confidential helpline, self-management and awareness training, information for people with arthritis and health professionals, and local activity and support. We also campaign locally and nationally to help change attitudes and laws and to ensure people with arthritis have access to the treatments and services they need and deserve.

## Contact us

For confidential information and support, contact the Arthritis Care Helpline

**Freephone: 0808 800 4050**

10am-4pm (weekdays)

Email: [Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk](mailto:Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk)

For information about Arthritis Care and the services we offer, contact us at: [www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

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