



# Gout

Gout is a painful inflammation of the joints. It affects about two or three in every thousand adults. It tends to run in families and men are more commonly affected than women. Gout can usually be treated and further attacks can often be prevented.

## What are the symptoms of gout?

Gout often comes in 'attacks'. An attack can develop suddenly over a few hours and may cause severe pain in one or more joints. Any joint can be affected. The most commonly affected joint is at the base of the big toe. This makes walking very painful and even the weight of bedclothes can hurt. The joint usually swells and the skin next to the joint may look red and inflamed. If left untreated, the attack may last several days before easing. Less severe attacks can occur which may mimic other forms of arthritis.

## What causes gout?

Gout is caused by a chemical in the blood called uric acid. 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. Slightly raised levels of uric acid usually cause no problems. From time to time the level may become too high. With high levels of uric acid, tiny grit-like crystals of uric acid form. These crystals collect in a joint and cause swelling and pain. (They irritate like a piece of grit in the eye does.) For most people with gout, the build up of uric acid cannot be prevented. Their body just has a tendency to make or build up too much uric acid. For some people, the build up of uric acid may have a reason. For example:

- ◆ If you do not have enough water in your body (dehydration).
- ◆ Too much alcohol may cause uric acid levels to rise.
- ◆ Some medicines such as 'water tablets' (diuretics) or low dose aspirin may raise the level of uric acid.
- ◆ In some illnesses where the cells of the body have a rapid 'turnover', more uric acid is made than usual. Severe psoriasis and some blood disorders are examples.
- ◆ Eating large amounts of certain foods such as meat, peas and beans may 'tip the balance' in some people to raise the uric acid higher than normal.

## Is gout serious?

Although a gout attack can be very painful, it rarely causes other problems even if not treated. Uric acid crystals form kidney stones in a few people. These might damage a kidney but this is uncommon. Sometimes the crystals form harmless bumps under the skin. About half the people who have gout also develop high blood pressure in later life.

## What can I do if I have gout?

- ◆ If you are overweight, try to lose some. This can help lower the uric acid level.
- ◆ Large amounts of alcohol may make gout worse. There is no 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.

## Treating gout attacks

- ◆ *Anti-inflammatory painkillers* reduce the pain and inflammation quickly. Most gout attacks will stop with a short course of an anti-inflammatory painkiller. Indomethacin is a common one used for gout but other types are also effective. Many people with gout like to have a supply of tablets on 'stand by' just in case an attack occurs. Pain is usually eased within 12-24 hours of starting medication. They are usually needed only for a few days until the inflammation and pain have gone completely. Most people can take short courses of these medicines without any problems. The most common side effect is an upset stomach or heartburn. Some people need a second medicine to 'protect the stomach' if these stomach side effects are a problem.
- ◆ *Colchicine* is an alternative medicine that can be used to ease gout attacks. It is usually used if there are problems or side effects with anti-inflammatory medication.
- ◆ *Steroid tablets* will also reduce pain and inflammation of gout and are another alternative if there are problems or side effects with anti-inflammatory painkillers or colchicine.

## Preventing gout attacks

Many people will only have an attack of gout every now and then. In such people, having some anti-inflammatory medication available is all that is required to treat each attack. For some people, gout attacks occur more often. In this situation a medicine called allopurinol can be taken every day to prevent attacks occurring.

### *Allopurinol (Zyloric)*

This is commonly prescribed to *prevent* gout attacks. It does not have any effect during a gout attack as it is not a painkiller. It works by lowering the level of uric acid in the blood. It takes two to three months to become fully effective. It then needs to be taken each day to keep the uric acid level normal and prevent gout attacks. When first taken, allopurinol can sometimes cause a gout attack. This is because it may cause the level of uric acid to rise slightly before it then falls. For this reason it is not normally started during a gout attack. It is best to start it after an attack has settled. Sometimes an anti-inflammatory painkiller is prescribed for the first few weeks after starting 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 needed varies from person to person. Treatment is usually started with a low dose. A blood test is often taken 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 300 mg each day. If an attack of gout happens while taking allopurinol, anti-inflammatory medication can still be taken to relieve the pain. However, this may indicate that the dose of allopurinol may need to be increased. If this happens it is best to consult a doctor.

Side effects are uncommon with allopurinol. Many people have complete prevention of gout attacks while taking a daily dose. Should side effects occur, other medicines with a similar action are sometimes prescribed, for example, probenecid or sulphapyrazone.