

Gout

Gout is a very painful form of arthritis. Gout is also the most treatable form of arthritis. There are long term medicines that can treat the causes of gout so that the pain goes away and damage to the joints and kidneys is prevented.

What causes gout?

Gout is caused by high levels of uric acid in your blood. When you have a gout attack some uric acid turns into very sharp crystals in your joint, usually your big toe. The crystals in the joint are what cause the intense pain you feel when you have a gout attack.

Your body makes uric acid when your body processes the food you eat. It is normal to have some uric acid in your blood. The normal level is under 0.36 mmol per litre of blood (or 0.36 mmol/L). Most people get rid of uric acid through their kidneys into their urine.

Some medicines such as diuretics (water pills) can also affect people's uric acid levels.

What is a gout attack?

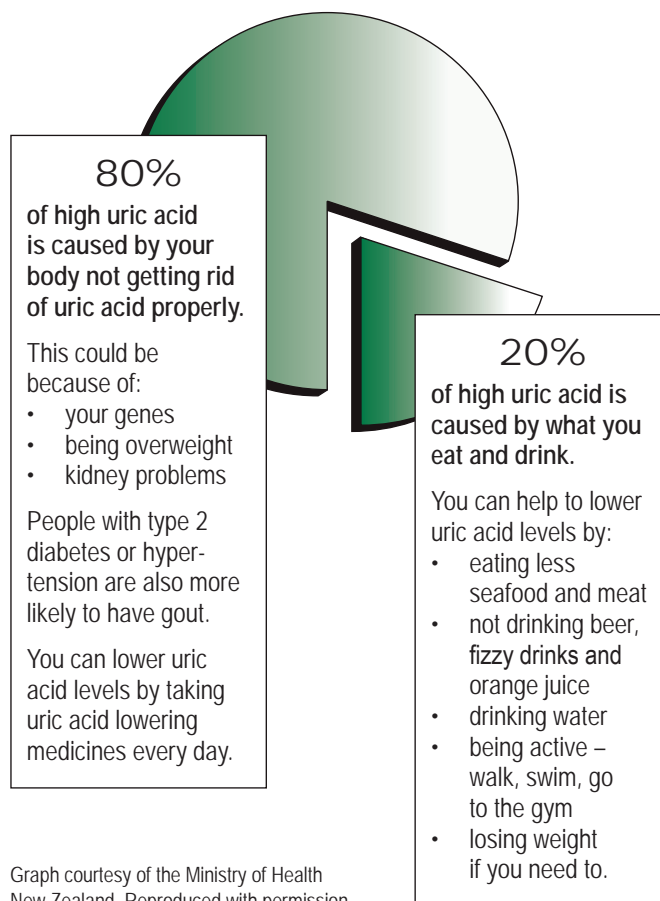
An attack of gout usually only affects one joint. It becomes swollen and extremely sore. It may look red and feel hot to touch. Often, it is the big toe joint that is affected, but the mid-foot, ankle, knee, finger joints, wrist and elbow can also be affected.

Important: if you feel unwell or have a fever you must see your doctor urgently in case you have a joint infection – these can cause you to become extremely unwell and can even cause death.

New information about gout

Research studies carried out over the last few years have changed the way we think about gout. These studies showed that some people make more uric acid than other people, while other people's bodies do not get rid of enough uric acid when they pass urine.

The research identified genes that cause some people to make too much uric acid or not get rid of enough uric acid. Māori and Pacific peoples are more likely to have those genes than other groups. All these new research studies showed that gout needs to be treated by bringing your uric acid levels down.



Graph courtesy of the Ministry of Health New Zealand. Reproduced with permission.

Treatment of gout

Pain medicines

There are three types of pain medicines you can take for gout attacks:

- anti-inflammatories such as diclofenac, ibuprofen and naproxen
- steroids such as prednisone
- colchicine taken for short-term pain relief.

Most of these medicines should not be taken at high doses long term because they can cause side effects such as stomach problems. Your doctor will advise you which is best for you. Anti-inflammatories are not suitable for some people, and can be dangerous. Make sure you ask your doctor how long you should take pain medicine for and about side effects.

Patient information – Gout



Remember your doctor will give you a low dose of pain medicines for up to 6 months when you start uric acid lowering medicines.

Uric acid lowering medicines

If you have had more than two gout attacks in 12 months then your doctor will recommend you take a long-term uric acid lowering medicine. These medicines work in two different ways. Some medicines such as Allopurinol and Febuxostat stop your body making uric acid and other medicines such as Probenicid and Benzbromarone work by helping your body get rid of uric acid when you pass urine.

You need to take uric acid lowering medicine every day even if you are having a gout attack. When you start taking uric acid lowering medicine your body is getting rid of more uric acid than usual so you might get a gout attack. To help avoid this happening your doctor will start with a low dose of your uric acid lowering medicine and increase it slowly until your uric acid level is below 0.36 mmol/L. They will also prescribe you a medicine (eg, colchicine) to take for up to 6 months to help prevent gout flare ups. Some people have to get their levels down to 0.3 mmol/L if they have a lot of uric acid damage to their joints.

Uric acid lowering medicines can have serious side effects such as a bad skin rash. Ask your doctor about side effects and what you should do if you get them.

A lot of people are put off by having to take uric acid lowering medicine every day. And some people think that gout isn't serious – it is just painful. This isn't true. Gout can cause permanent damage to your joints affecting your ability to walk and use your hands. Gout is also a sign you could get diabetes, heart disease and kidney problems.

Getting your uric acid levels checked

You should have the uric acid levels in your blood checked every six months to see if you are getting to your target of at least 0.36 mmol/L (or 0.30 mmol/L if you have joint damage from uric acid). Don't get your uric acid checked when you are having a gout attack. That's when some of the uric acid in your blood has turned into crystals in your sore joint, so the uric acid levels in your blood will be lower and you might think it is not a problem.

If you are taking uric acid lowering medicines every day and your uric acid levels are not going down, ask your doctor if you need to increase the dosage.

Gout and food and drink

For many years, people believed that the only way to treat gout was to stop eating and drinking the things that caused gout attacks.

New research has changed the focus of treating gout. Remember that only 20% of high uric acid is caused by what you eat and drink. So if you try and manage your gout by stopping eating and drinking all the things that cause you to get gout attacks then you are only focusing on 20% of the causes.

If you are having more than two gout attacks a year you need to be taking long-term uric lowering acid medicines to stop your gout. You could also reduce the food and drink that cause your gout attacks so you are working on 100% of the causes.

As well as taking uric acid lowering medicines regularly, what else can I do?

- Drink lots of water – not drinking enough water can cause gout attacks
- Swap fizzy drinks, fruit juice and flavoured milks for water, coffee, tea and plain milk
- Try and lose weight if you need to.
- Only eat small amounts of red meat and shellfish, and don't drink too much beer.

Who gets gout?

In New Zealand more men get gout than women. The majority of people who get gout are older Pakeha males who have usually stopped working. However Māori and Pacific men are more likely to get gout when they are much younger (from their late teens and early 20s). So if Māori and Pacific men do not get their gout treated, this affects their ability to work as well as participate in family and community activities and feel good about themselves.

Remember: if you are prescribed a medicine to prevent gout attacks, you must take it every day. You will need to get a prescription from your doctor every 3 months. Tell your whānau/family about how your gout needs to be managed so they can help you stick with your plan.

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