

What is gout?

Gout is a kind of arthritis. It can cause an attack of sudden burning pain, stiffness, and swelling in a joint, usually a big toe. These attacks can happen over and over unless gout is treated. Over time, they can harm your joints, tendons, and other tissues. Gout is most common in men.

Gout - Cause

Gout is caused by too much uric acid in the blood (hyperuricemia). Hyperuricemia usually does no harm, and many people with high levels of uric acid in the blood never develop gout. The exact cause of hyperuricemia sometimes is not discovered, although inherited factors (genes) seem to play a role. When uric acid levels in the blood are too high, uric acid may form crystals that build up in the joints. Gout can seem to flare up without specific cause or can be brought on by factors such as:

Certain conditions related to diet and body weight, such as:

- Obesity.
- Moderate to heavy alcohol ingestion, particularly beer.¹
- A diet rich in meat and seafood (high-purine foods).
- Very low-calorie diets.
- Medicines that may increase uric acid concentration, such as:
 - Regular use of aspirin or niacin.
 - Medicines that reduce the amount of salt and water in the body (diuretics).
 - Medicines that cause rapid cell death (chemotherapy, usually used to treat cancer).
 - Medicines that suppress the immune system, such as cyclosporine, that are used to prevent your body from rejecting an organ transplant.
- Major illness or certain medical conditions, such as:
 - Rapid weight loss, as might happen in hospitalized patients who have changes in diet or medicines.
 - Chronic kidney disease.
 - High blood pressure.
 - Conditions that cause an abnormal rapid turnover of cells, such as psoriasis, multiple myeloma, hemolytic anemia, or tumors.
 - Lead poisoning.
 - Hypothyroidism.
- Surgery.
- Having been born with a rare condition that causes high blood uric acid levels. People with Kelley-Seegmiller syndrome or Lesch-Nyhan syndrome have a partial or complete deficiency in an enzyme that helps to control uric acid levels.

Gout - Symptoms

Gout usually develops after a number of years of buildup of uric acid crystals in the joints and surrounding tissues. Symptoms include:

- Warmth, pain, swelling, and extreme tenderness in a joint, usually a big toe joint This symptom is called podagra.

- Pain that starts during the night and is so intense that even light pressure from a sheet is intolerable.
- Rapid increase in discomfort, lasting for some hours of the night and then easing during the next few days.
- As the gout attack subsides, the skin around the affected joint may peel and feel itchy.

Other symptoms may include:

- Very red or purplish skin around the affected joint, which may appear to be infected.
- Fever.
- Limited movement in the affected joint.

Symptoms of gout vary.

- Symptoms may occur after an illness or surgery.
- Some people may not experience gout as many painful attacks but rather develop chronic gout. Chronic gout in older adults may be less painful and can be confused with other forms of arthritis.
- Gout may first appear as nodules (tophi) on the hands, elbows, or ears. There may be no classic symptoms of a gout attack.

By the time you experience the symptoms of a gout attack, uric acid has been building up in your blood, and uric acid deposits have been forming on one or more of your joints.

The big toe joint is most commonly affected. But the joints of the feet, ankles, knees, wrists, fingers, and elbows may also be involved. Inflammation of the fluid sacs (bursae) that cushion tissues may develop, particularly in the elbow (olecranon bursitis) and knee (prepatellar bursitis).

How is gout diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms and do a physical exam. Your doctor may also take a sample of fluid from your joint to look for uric acid crystals. This is the best way to test for gout. Your doctor may also do a blood test to measure the amount of uric acid in your blood.

How is it treated?

To stop a gout attack, your doctor can give you a shot of corticosteroids, or prescribe a large daily dose of one or more medicines. The doses will get smaller as your symptoms go away. Relief from a gout attack often begins within 24 hours if you start treatment right away.

To ease the pain during a gout attack, rest the joint that hurts. Taking ibuprofen or another anti-inflammatory medicine can also help you feel better. But don't take aspirin. It can make gout worse by raising the uric acid level in the blood.

To prevent future attacks, your doctor can prescribe a medicine to reduce uric acid buildup in your blood. If your doctor prescribes medicine to lower your uric acid levels, be sure to take it as directed. Most people continue to take this medicine for the rest of their lives.

Paying attention to what you eat may help you manage your gout. Eat moderate amounts of a healthy mix of foods to control your weight and get the nutrients you need. Avoid regular daily intake of meat, seafood, and alcohol (especially beer). Drink plenty of water and other fluids.