

Definition: Gout is a disorder that results from the build-up of uric acid in the tissues or any joint—most often the joint of the big toe (90%). It can be severely painful and usually wakes people up at night. Pain, redness over affected area, warmth and swelling is common with a sudden onset.

Gout attacks are caused by deposits of crystallized uric acid in the joint. Uric acid is present in the blood and eliminated in the urine. In people who have gout, uric acid accumulates and crystallizes in the joints. Uric acid is the result of the breakdown of purines—chemicals that are found naturally in our bodies and in food. Some people develop gout because their kidneys have difficulty eliminating normal amounts of uric acid, while others produce too much uric acid. Gout occurs most commonly in the big toe because uric acid is sensitive to temperature changes. At cooler temperatures, uric acid turns into crystals. Since the toe is the part of the body that is furthest from the heart, it's also the coolest part of the body—and, thus, the most likely target of gout. However, gout can affect any joint in the body.

Predisposition: The tendency to accumulate uric acid is often inherited. Other factors that put a person at risk for developing gout include: high blood pressure, Low Dose Aspirin, diabetes, obesity, surgery, chemotherapy, stress, and certain medications and vitamins. For example, the body's ability to remove uric acid can be negatively affected by taking aspirin, some diuretic medications ("water pills"), and the vitamin niacin (also called nicotinic acid). While gout is more common in men aged 40 to 60 years, it can occur in younger men and also occurs in women. Consuming foods and beverages that contain high levels of purines can trigger an attack of gout. Some foods contain more purines than others and have been associated with an increase of uric acid, which leads to gout. You may be able to reduce your chances of getting a gout attack by limiting or avoiding the following foods and beverages: shellfish, organ meats (kidney, liver, etc.), red meat, red wine, beer, and coffee.

Diagnosis: A good medication, diet and medical history is very important. Laboratory tests including a uric acid test are occasionally taken. Sometimes the uric acid level is normal if blood test is taken several days after attack. X-rays are sometimes ordered to determine if the inflammation is caused by something other than gout or can detect gouty arthropathy.

Treatment: Initial physician treatment for gout may include oral medications or possibly a cortisone injection. Rest and elevation of the affected foot is recommended. Certain diuretics cause dehydration and increase in uric acid, so have to monitor them carefully.

Dietary restrictions: Foods and beverages that are high in purines should be avoided, since purines are converted in the body to uric acid. Drink plenty of water and other fluids each day (at least 8-10 glasses), while also avoiding alcoholic beverages and caffeinated products—which cause dehydration.

The symptoms of gout and the inflammatory process usually resolve in 3-10 days with treatment. If gout symptoms continue despite the initial treatment, or if repeated attacks occur, make a follow up appointment.