Gout

Gout can be very painful. But most gout attacks go away within 10 days, even without treatment.

What is gout?

Gout causes bad pain and swelling in your joints. It happens when you get a lot of a chemical called urate in your blood. Urate is made in the body when you digest certain foods. It's usually harmless. But in some people, it builds up and forms crystals. The crystals cause inflammation and pain when they gather in a joint.

Not everyone with high levels of urate gets gout. But the more urate you have, the more likely you are to get gout.

These are some of the things that can cause too much urate in the blood:

- Drinking too much alcohol, especially beer
- Eating a lot of certain foods, especially red meat
- Being very overweight (obese)
- Having certain illnesses, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol
- Taking certain medicines, such as diuretics for high blood pressure and regular aspirin.

What are the symptoms?

You have very bad pain in one of your joints. It comes on suddenly, over a few hours. People often get attacks of gout at night. The pain may wake you. You’re most likely to get gout in your big toe, and in joints in your foot, ankle, knee, wrist, finger and elbow.

A joint with gout usually swells up. The skin around it may look red and shiny. It may feel stiff and warm to touch. The pain will be worse if you bump the joint. Urate crystals can also form under the skin on your hands, knees, wrists, elbows or ears. They look like white bumps. Doctors call these bumps tophi.

Your doctor can probably diagnose gout by examining you. You’ll probably also need a blood test to check how much urate you have in your blood.

What treatments work?

Several medicines are used to treat and prevent attacks of gout. And there are some things you can try yourself. But the research is not very good, so we can’t be sure how well any of these treatments work.
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**Medicines to treat gout attacks**

These medicines aim to treat pain and swelling during an attack of gout.

Painkillers called **nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** are often used. There are lots of different types. These are some your doctor may prescribe: diclofenac (brand name Voltarol), etoricoxib (Arcoxia) and indometacin (Rimacid).

NSAIDs may cause bleeding in the stomach, especially at higher doses. You shouldn’t take more than the prescribed dose. Your doctor may prescribe another drug as well as the NSAID, to protect your stomach.

If you take high doses of some NSAIDs regularly over a long period of time, there is a small increased risk of having a stroke or heart attack. But you need to take NSAIDs for only a short time to treat gout, so this should not put you at any risk.

A medicine called **colchicine** has been used for many years to treat gout. Your doctor may prescribe it if you can’t take NSAIDs. Most people who take it get vomiting and diarrhoea.

You can’t take high doses of colchicine for long, because it can cause dangerous side effects. You may get very bad diarrhoea, bleeding from your stomach, skin rashes, and kidney or liver damage. There are also some rare side effects, including nerve problems and blood disorders. But you shouldn't get serious problems if you take the drug for a short time, as prescribed.

If you can't take other medicines, your doctor may prescribe a short course of **steroid tablets**. Or you might have a **steroid injection** into the inflamed joint. You may get fewer side effects from steroids than from other gout treatments. But high doses of steroids, taken for a long time, can have serious side effects. These side effects are very unlikely with the short course of steroids you'd need for gout.

**Medicines to prevent gout**

These medicines aim to reduce the amount of urate in your body, to cut the chances of you getting another attack of gout.

They are taken long-term. Before you start, you may want to think about how much your gout bothers you, how often you get attacks, and whether you are prepared to keep taking tablets every day.

**Allopurinol** has been used for many years to prevent gout (brand names include Caplenal, Cosuric, Rimapurinol, and Zyloric). But it can make your symptoms worse if you start taking it during an attack of gout. So your doctor won’t start you on it until at least two weeks after your gout has settled. You are also more likely to have an attack of gout when you first start taking it. So you’ll probably take another drug, either colchicine or an NSAID, for the first three months you take allopurinol. It may take a couple of months to start working. You'll need to have blood tests during that time. Allopurinol sometimes causes skin rashes.
Colchicine is sometimes tried to prevent gout, at a lower dose than you would take for short-term treatment. Your doctor may prescribe it if allopurinol hasn’t worked. You need to be careful to take only the recommended amount of colchicine.

Your doctor may prescribe probenecid if allopurinol hasn't worked. But it may make you more likely to get kidney stones. That’s because it lowers urate in your blood but increases urate in your urine. You need to drink plenty of fluids, about 2 to 3 litres a day.

Other side effects include stomach upset, needing to urinate often, headaches, hot flushes, dizziness, hair loss, anaemia, sore gums, liver and kidney problems, and blood disorders.

Things you can do for yourself

It may help to put an ice pack around the painful joint. You can make an ice pack by wrapping a bag of frozen peas in a tea towel.

To keep the bedclothes off your joint at night, you can make a protective cover for your joint (from a cardboard box, for example).

Gout is more likely if you eat certain foods or drink beer or spirits. You may be able to prevent gout by changing what you eat and drink. But there hasn’t been much research to show if this works.

These changes are recommended by doctors:

- Losing weight on a calorie-controlled diet (if you're overweight)
- Eating one less portion of meat or fish a day
- Drinking less alcohol, and choosing wine instead of beer or spirits
- Drinking a glass of skimmed milk each day.

What will happen to me?

Your gout attack should go away in about 10 days. Some people get only one attack of gout in their lives. But most people who’ve had one attack get more. More than 8 in 10 people get gout again within three years.

A few people get frequent attacks of gout. This is sometimes called chronic gouty arthritis. It's quite rare. The symptoms are the same as for normal gout, but you get them more often. If you get frequent attacks of gout, the urate crystals can damage your joints. This makes them feel stiff.

If you have high levels of urate, you're more likely to get kidney stones. Kidney stones are formed from waste products in your urine, including urate. They develop in your kidneys and cause pain when your body tries to flush them out in your urine. But not everyone who has gout gets kidney stones.