

## **Patient Musculoskeletal Information Sheet**

### **Gout**

#### **What is gout?**

Gout is caused by a chemical in the blood called uric acid (urate). Uric acid is made in the body and is usually harmless. Most is passed out with the urine.

In people with gout the amount of uric acid in the blood builds up. The level may become too high and crystals of uric acid may form. The crystals typically collect in a joint. The crystals irritate the tissues in the joint to cause inflammation, swelling, and pain - a gout attack. The crystals can also form bumps (tophi) under the skin. These are usually found on the extremities, for example, the ears or fingers and toes. They are usually harmless and painless.

People who develop gout produce too much uric acid, excrete too little or do both.

#### **How common is it and who gets it?**

Gout affects about 1 in 200 adults. Men are more commonly affected. A first attack of gout typically develops in middle age, but it sometimes occurs in younger people. It can run in some families and there is a family history of gout in about 1 in 5 cases.

#### **What are the symptoms?**

Gout usually occurs in attacks. An attack typically develops quickly over a few hours and usually causes severe pain in one joint. The big toe joint is the most commonly affected joint, but any joint can be affected. Sometimes two or more joints are affected.

Affected joints usually swell, and the nearby skin may look red and inflamed. Walking can be very painful and even the weight of bedclothes can hurt.

If left untreated, a gout attack may last several days, but usually goes completely within 7-10 days. Weeks, months or even years may go by between attacks. Some people only ever have one attack.

#### **How is it diagnosed?**

Gout is usually diagnosed clinically, without any special tests, if you have the typical gout symptoms. Your doctor may take some fluid out of a swollen joint. This is done with a needle and syringe. The fluid is looked at under the microscope. Crystals of urate (uric acid) can be seen in the fluid to confirm the diagnosis of gout.

If there is uncertainty about the diagnosis your doctor may refer you to a specialist.

Gout can be associated with other medical conditions. One such condition is high blood pressure. Your doctor should arrange a blood pressure check and some simple blood tests to screen for other problems if you have not already had these done.

## **Is gout serious?**

A gout attack can be very painful. Other effects from gout are uncommon. Joint damage may occur if you have recurring attacks. In a few people, uric acid crystals form kidney stones or may cause some kidney damage. Tophi occasionally become infected.

## **What is the treatment for an attack of gout?**

### General measures

- Elevate affected limb if possible
- Apply an ice pack to the affected joint:
  - Wrap the ice pack (or peas) in a towel to avoid direct skin contact and ice burn
  - Apply for about 20 minutes, and then stop. (It should not be applied for long periods.)
  - Repeat as often as required BUT ...
  - Make sure the temperature of the affected part has returned to normal before applying again

### Anti-inflammatory painkillers

- A short course of an anti-inflammatory painkiller will quickly ease most gout attacks (within 12-24 hours). There are several types and brands, such as naproxen and ibuprofen
- Some people cannot take this type of medication so an alternative treatment can be given

### Colchicine

- This is usually used if you have problems or side-effects with anti-inflammatory painkillers

### Steroids

- These are another alternative if you cannot take anti-inflammatory painkillers and colchicine
- They can be taken orally or injected, either directly into the affected joint or into a muscle

## **Can further attacks of gout be treated?**

Lifestyle measures and medication can be used to prevent further attacks of gout.

Further information on lifestyle measures can be found in the Gout Lifestyle Advice patient information leaflet on the surgery website [www.kilmenysurgery.co.uk](http://www.kilmenysurgery.co.uk).

Medications to prevent gout include allopurinol and febuxostat. They work by lowering the uric acid level in the blood. Your doctor will discuss these medications with you if you need them.