

Gout: Spot the signs before joint damage sets in

Left unchecked, it can lead to kidney and heart issues, says clinical immunologist and rheumatologist Grace Chan Yin Lai

If you have ever been jolted awake by a burning pain in your feet, only to find it too tender to touch, it could be a sign of gout – a form of inflammatory arthritis. Gout is caused by the build-up of uric acid in the blood. When it is produced excessively and cannot be flushed out efficiently, urate crystals can form in the joints, triggering pain, swelling and inflammation.

Factors such as diet, lifestyle, age and gender can increase your risk of developing gout, says Dr Grace Chan Yin Lai, a clinical immunologist and rheumatologist at Mount Alvernia Hospital. Here, she explains the signs to watch and how to prevent long-term complications.

Q How is gout different from other types of joint pain and what other symptoms are there?

Compared to other types of arthritis that tend to develop slowly and worsen over time, gout attacks strike suddenly and intensely. The pain often occurs in the middle of the night due to the body's lower temperatures that trigger the formation of urate crystals, and typically peaks within 12 to 24 hours. The inflamed area may also appear red and swollen, and feel extremely sensitive.

Gout primarily affects joints around the foot, such as the toes and ankles. It also has the tendency to affect joints that have suffered previous injury. Some people may experience limited joint mobility, or feel unusually tired or feverish during an attack.

Q Who is most at risk of developing gout and what happens if it is left untreated?

People with diets high in red meat, seafood and sugary drinks, and who often live sedentary lifestyles, risk developing gout. Excess weight can also increase the amount of uric acid in the body, making it more difficult for the kidneys to flush it out. Other risk



Gout tends to affect joints of the lower limbs, such as the big toe or ankle, and the inflamed area may become red, swollen and extremely tender. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

factors include chronic conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes and kidney disease, as well as heavy alcohol intake.

Gout is most often seen in men over 40, and in women after menopause when the amount of estrogen – which keeps uric levels in check – begins to drop. People with a family history of gout may also be more likely to develop it.

Repeated attacks can lead to permanent joint damage and cause urate crystals to form hard lumps under the skin. The condition can also increase the risk of kidney stones and, over time, may contribute to cardiovascular issues.

Q How can individuals with gout manage flare-ups and reduce future attacks?

Doctors may prescribe medications such as steroids or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs to ease flare-ups. Long-term medication may be recommended to reduce the production of uric acid or help the kidneys flush it out faster. Applying an ice pack can also reduce swelling and ease discomfort.

It is also wise to limit the intake of foods high in purines, such as red meat, organ meats, certain seafood (including anchovies, sardines and shellfish), and sugary drinks or alcohol – especially beer. Opt for more plant-based foods, low-fat dairy and whole grains, which are less likely to trigger flare-ups.

Maintaining a healthy weight and staying well-hydrated can also help manage the condition.



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