Gout

Gout is an inflammatory condition (*arthritis*) caused by a build-up of uric acid crystals in the joints. Uric acid is a chemical normally present in the blood. Under some circumstances, uric acid can form into crystals in your joints. This causes joint swelling, redness and pain. Repeat attacks are common. Over time, uric acid crystals can form into masses near a joint, called tophi, that can cause disfigurement.

CAUSES

The disease starts with elevated levels of uric acid in the blood. Some of the reasons this happens are:

- Inherited (passed down from a family member) problems with metabolism.
- Diseases that cause increased uric acid production (including obesity, psoriasis, and some cancers).
- Excessive alcohol use.
- Diet (especially diets rich in meat and seafood).
- Medicines (including warfarin, certain chemotherapy, diuretics and aspirin).
- Chronic kidney disease.

Not everyone with elevated uric acid levels gets gout. It is not understood why. Surgery, joint injury and eating too much of a certain foods are some of the factors that can lead to gout.

SYMPTOMS

- An attack of gout comes on quickly and causes pain, redness and swelling in a joint.
- You can have a fever.
- Often times, only one joint is involved.
- Certain joints are more commonly involved:
  - Base of the great toe.
  - Knee.
  - Ankle.
  - Wrist.
  - Finger.

Without treatment, an attack usually goes away in a few days to weeks. Between attacks, you usually will not have symptoms (which is different from many other forms of arthritis).

DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver will suspect gout based on your description of your symptoms and on your exam. Gout has a characteristic timing and joint involvement, which helps to diagnosis it. Removal of fluid from the joint (*arthrocentesis*) is done to check for uric acid crystals. Gout is confirmed when uric acid crystals are seen, using a special microscope, in joint fluid . Your caregiver (or a specialist) will numb the area over the joint with a local drug (*anaesthetic*), and use a needle to remove joint fluid for exam. Sometimes blood, urine, and x-ray tests are also used to diagnose gout.

TREATMENT

There are two phases to gout treatment: treating the acute attack, and preventing attacks (*prophylaxis*).

Treatment of an acute attack:

- Medications. These include anti-inflammatory medicines or steroid medications.
- An injection of steroid medication into the affected joint is sometimes necessary.
- Rest the painful joint. Movement can worsen the arthritis.
- To help lessen pain, you may use either warm or cold treatments on painful joints, depending on which

works best for you.
- Other things that may help gout attacks are: coffee, vitamin C, and cherries. Advisable amounts are not known. Discuss these with your caregiver before using them.

After the acute attack subsides, your caregiver may advise prophylactic medication. These medications either help your kidneys eliminate uric acid from your body, or decrease your uric acid production. You may need to stay on these medications for a very long time.

The early phase of treatment with prophylactic medication can be associated with an increase in gout attacks. For this reason, during the first few months of treatment, your caregiver may also advise you to use other medications usually used for acute gout treatment. Be sure you understand your caregiver's directions.

You should also discuss dietary treatment with your caregiver. Certain foods (such as meats and fish) can increase uric acid levels, whereas other (such as dairy) can decrease levels. Your caregiver can give you a list of foods to avoid.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **DO NOT** take aspirin to relieve pain. This raises uric acid levels.
- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- Rest the joint as much as possible. When in bed, keep sheets and blankets off painful areas.
- Keep affected joint raised.
- Use crutches if the painful joint is in your leg.
- Drink 8 to 10 glasses of liquids daily. This helps your body get rid of uric acid. **Do not** drink alcoholic beverages. They slow the passage of uric acid.
- Follow your caregiver's dietary instructions.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- An oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C) develops, or as your caregiver suggests.
- You develop diarrhea or vomiting or any side effects from medications.
- You do not feel better in 24 hours or are getting worse.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your joint becomes suddenly more tender, and is associated with chills and fever.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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