



GOT GOUT?

by Jean Park, M.D.

Gout is a form of arthritis caused by the buildup of uric acid crystals in the joints and tissues and

has been known to affect us for thousands of years. Records from 2600 B.C. reveal that the ancient Egyptians suffered from podagra, or gouty arthritis of the big toe. Hippocrates also described gout in 400 B.C. By 1679, the inventor of the microscope, Anton von Leeuwenhoek, first saw a uric acid crystal which has since been shown to be the underlying cause of gout.

Historically, the gout sufferer was stereotypically described as a wealthy, portly middle-aged man who spent his time dining on the finest foods and alcohol. After the merriment, this man often developed a red, hot, excruciatingly painful big toe the pain being so great that even the weight of a bed sheet atop the toe caused great pain. It should not be surprising, then, to learn King Henry VIII of England suffered from gout.

Gout is a common condition today and affects people regardless of social class or dietary habits. In the United States, approximately 2.1 million people suffer from gout. While middle-aged men most commonly develop gout, women can be affected as well, usually after menopause. Eating high purine foods such as meat, seafood, dried beans and peas, anchovies, and drinking alcohol excessively are known to elevate blood levels of uric acid and increase a person's risk of developing gout. However, other factors may predispose a person to developing gout. Some people have an inherited tendency towards high uric acid levels in the blood.

Other people may have attacks triggered by:

- 1) medications
- 2) certain diseases associated with gout (kidney problems, high

- blood pressure),
- 3) joint injury
- 4) fasting and dehydration.

An attack of gout is characterized by sudden, severe joint pain accompanied by redness, swelling and tenderness of the joint. Usually one joint is affected at a time, but multiple joints can be involved

RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING GOUT

- **Genetics.** 20% of people with gout have a family history of the disease.
- **Gender and age.** It is more common in men than in women and more common in adults than in children.
- **Weight.** Being overweight increases the risk of developing hyperuricemia and gout because there is more tissue available for turnover or breakdown, which leads to excess uric acid production.
- **Alcohol consumption.** Drinking too much alcohol can lead to hyperuricemia, because alcohol interferes with the removal of uric acid from the body.
- **Diet.** Eating too many foods that are rich in purines can cause or aggravate gout in some people.
- **Lead exposure.** In some cases, exposure to lead in the environment can cause gout.
- **Other health problems.** Renal insufficiency, or the inability of the kidneys to eliminate waste products, is a common cause of gout in older people. Other medical problems that contribute to high blood levels of uric acid include:
 - high blood pressure
 - hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland)

simultaneously. While a high blood level of uric acid is often seen in people with gout, this pattern is not always the case. The most effective way to diagnose gout is to withdraw a small amount of fluid from the affected joint. The fluid can be examined under a microscope for uric acid crystals. The diagnosis of gout, however, does not always require a sample of joint fluid.

Fortunately, gout is a very treatable

HIGH-PURINE FOODS

- anchovies • herring
- asparagus • liver
- beef kidneys • mackerel
- brains • mushrooms
- dried beans & peas • sardines
- game meats • scallops • gravy
- sweetbreads

type of arthritis. With proper treatment, many do not suffer any long-term consequences. Medications that reduce pain and inflammation associated with gout are available. Some patients require additional medications that treat the underlying high blood levels of uric acid to minimize the number of future gout attacks. Life-style modifications, including a diet low in high purine foods and exercise may also help reduce the frequency of gout attacks. Here are some tips to remember:

- Avoid dehydration and drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids.
- Avoid foods high in purines.
- Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy body weight.
- Remember to tell your doctor about all the medicines, vitamins and supplements you take.
- Plan follow-up visits with your doctor to evaluate your progress.

For more information on Gout, visit the following government websites:

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)

www.niams.nih.gov

American College of Rheumatology/ Association of Rheumatology Health Professionals

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Atlanta, GA 30357-0669
Phone: 404-872-7100 or
800-568-4045 (free of charge)
or call your local chapter
listed in the phone directory
www.arthritis.org