

What is it?

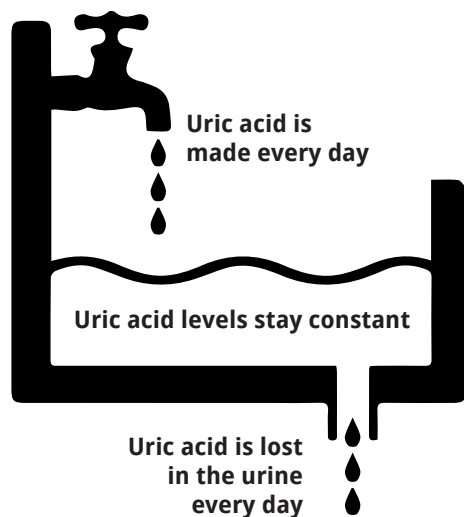


Gout is the most common type of inflammatory arthritis affecting men. It is caused by a build-up of uric acid in the body. Everybody makes uric acid. But when levels are too high it can lead to gout.

There are 2 main sources of uric acid:

1. **Your body makes uric acid every day**
2. **Your diet (especially meats, fish, seafood, alcohol, & sugary drinks)**

Your body gets rid of uric acid by flushing it out in the urine. In healthy people, the amount of uric acid being made is about the same as the amount being lost. If the kidneys can't keep up, levels will build up in the blood. As the levels build up high enough they can start to form crystals. If crystals form inside the joints, the body's immune system attacks the crystals. This causes the joint to become red, hot, swollen and sore.



What is it going to do to me?



People usually find out they have high uric acid levels after they have an attack of gout. The attack usually happens suddenly and often in the early hours of the morning. You may go to bed one night feeling fine, and wake up with a joint that

feels like it's on fire.

The big toe is the most common joint affected. However, other joints can be affected including the ankle, foot, and knees. In severe cases, the wrists, elbows and fingers can be involved.

Gout flares usually go away after about 7 to 10 days of treatment. Several months or even years may pass before another flare happens. But if you've had one attack of gout, chances are you will eventually have others.

Gout can be a serious, long-term (chronic) condition. In the long run, gout can cause damage to the joints and eventually destroy them.

You can think of it like this: Imagine you fill a sink with water by turning on the tap. To prevent it from overflowing, you can pull the drain to let some of the water out. If the amount of water coming out the tap is the same as the amount going down the drain, there will be a constant level of water in the sink. But if the drain gets plugged, the level of water will start to rise. Problems happen when the water spills out of the sink onto the floor.

Your body does the same thing with uric acid. It is constantly making uric acid and getting it from food. The body normally keeps uric acid levels steady by getting rid of it in the urine. But if the kidneys can't keep up, levels build up in the blood (the sink fills up). If levels get high enough, uric acid can start to form crystals. This is like water spilling on the floor.

What can I do about it?



The first thing is don't panic. There are effective treatments available that can help you keep levels of uric acid in the healthy range.

There are two main strategies to treat gout:

1. **Treat gout attacks to reduce pain and swelling (like mopping up the water when it spills over the sink)**
2. **Keep uric acid at healthy levels to prevent further attacks (like turning off the tap)**

It is important to treat an attack of gout completely before trying to lower uric acid levels. The most common medicines to treat gout attacks are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), colchicine, steroid injections, and prednisone.

Changing your diet can affect uric acid levels but it is difficult. Two good medications that help lower uric acid levels are allopurinol and febuxostat. When you start or stop one of these medicines it can cause an attack of gout. *So once you start allopurinol or febuxostat you never stop if you have an attack of gout. You treat the attack with different medicines. If you stop the medicine it can make things worse. Your goal is to keep the level of uric acid below 360 umol/L (6 mg/dL).*

Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **Attend your appointments regularly**
- **Get your blood tests done as suggested by your doctor**
- **Look after your overall health**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat gout**

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RheumInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about gout and treatments for the disease. The website is operated by Dr. Andy Thompson, a rheumatologist.