

Gout Overview

Gout is one of medicine's oldest documented conditions and was, until recently, one of the least understood.

Once considered a disease of the rich and gluttonous, gout is now known to be a form of arthritis that can cause severe inflammation of the joints. This swelling is often accompanied by sharp pain. Gout usually causes inflammation in the feet, ankles, wrists and hands, with the big toe most often affected.

Causes

Gout is created when the body produces an excessive amount of uric acid. This abundance of uric acid causes crystals to form in the synovial joint, which in turn causes the pain and swelling that have become trademarks of the disease. Some in the medical field claim that gout is one of the most painful types of arthritis. Although the condition was once associated with gluttony, health professionals, patients and the general public have become better educated about the causes, symptoms and treatments for gout.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Many people who suffer with gout will tell you that the symptoms seemed to appear out of nowhere. This is one of the unfortunate trademarks of the disease. Symptoms can appear literally overnight. Patients report feelings of sudden pain, accompanied by swelling around the affected joint. The skin will turn a pinkish red, and appear to be shiny. Left untreated, these forms of "gout attack" can last for about a week. Another common symptom of gout is lumps that appear beneath the skin, especially around the heels, elbows and ears. The same uric acid crystals that cause pain and swelling in the joints will create these lumps, and may even create kidney stones.

For some people, these painful gout attacks are a one-time occurrence. Many others, however, will suffer with gout attacks at regular intervals. The pain and swelling will appear and subside every few months. If left untreated, the condition can persist and create permanent damage in the joints.

Before a treatment plan can be outlined, your doctor will ensure a positive diagnosis for gout. Since the condition can resemble other forms of arthritis, it is not always an easy diagnosis to make. A complete physical examination and diagnostic tests are required for positive results. Your doctor may take a sample of your joint fluids to measure the presence of uric acid crystals. Similarly, blood samples may be taken to measure the uric acid levels.

Treatment

Over half a million people in the United States suffer from gout. Fortunately, there are many different treatment options available to bring relief to these patients. Treatment of gout has a very strong success rate. The first step is usually for the doctor to prescribe medication, like allopurinol, to control the amount of uric acid produced by the body. Your doctor may also prescribe colchicines to help relieve the pain and inflammation caused by gout. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen, are commonly given, however Aspirin is not a recommended treatment. Proper diet and exercise are also important factors in treating gout.

As with any medical condition, it's important to speak with your doctor if you think you have gout. He or she will give you a proper physical assessment to verify your diagnosis, and then suggest a treatment program for you.