

1 What Is Gout?

- Gout is a type of arthritis caused by sharp crystals forming inside your joints.
- These crystals are made of uric acid — a waste product your body makes when it breaks down certain foods.
- Uric acid builds up when your body makes too much of it, or your kidneys don't remove enough.
- The crystals tend to settle in cooler joints at the tips of your limbs — most often the big toe, but also the ankle and knee.
- Attacks come on suddenly, often overnight, and the joint becomes hot, swollen, and extremely painful to touch.

How does gout compare to other joint pain?

Feature	Gout	Osteoarthritis	Rheumatoid Arthritis
Onset	Sudden — hours	Gradual — weeks/months	Gradual — days/weeks
Joints affected	Big toe, ankle, knee	Knees, hips, hands	Hands, wrists, feet — both sides
Pain character	Severe, burning, even bedsheets hurt	Aching, worse with use	Morning stiffness, improves with movement
Triggers	Rich food, alcohol, dehydration	Wear and tear over time	Immune system flares
Blood test finding	High uric acid (raised serum urate)	Usually normal	Raised inflammatory markers (CRP, ESR)

2 What Triggers an Attack?

Trigger	Why It Causes a Flare	What to Do About It
High-purine foods (red meat, offal, shellfish)	Purines break down into uric acid in the body	Reduce how often you eat them — you don't need to eliminate them entirely
Alcohol — especially beer and spirits	Alcohol raises uric acid production AND stops the kidneys removing it	Limit alcohol — beer is the worst offender
Dehydration	Concentrates uric acid in the blood, making crystals more likely	Aim for 2–3 litres of water daily, especially in hot weather
Sudden increase in exercise	Lactic acid from muscles competes with uric acid for removal by the kidneys	Build up exercise gradually — don't go from nothing to intense
Crash dieting or fasting	Rapid breakdown of body cells releases purines	Avoid very low calorie diets — steady weight loss is safer

Trigger	Why It Causes a Flare	What to Do About It
Some medications (diuretics, low-dose aspirin)	These reduce how well the kidneys excrete uric acid	Talk to your GP — never stop medication without advice
Joint injury or illness	Local inflammation can trigger crystals to deposit in that joint	Protect joints from injury; treat illnesses promptly

3 Treatment Options

Treatment	How It Helps	What to Know
Colchicine / Anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) — for acute attack	Quickly reduces the severe inflammation during a flare	Works best if started within 24 hours of the attack — take as prescribed
Corticosteroids (e.g. prednisolone)	An option if anti-inflammatories or colchicine cannot be used	Taken as tablets or an injection; usually a short course only
Urate-lowering therapy (allopurinol, febuxostat)	Lowers uric acid in your blood over time and prevents future attacks	Do NOT start during an active attack. Takes months to work fully. Most people need it long-term
Rest and ice — during attack	Reduces pain and swelling in the affected joint	Apply ice for 15–20 min at a time; raise the limb; avoid pressure on the joint
Diet changes	Reduces the amount of uric acid coming in through food	Diet alone rarely prevents attacks — medication is usually also needed
Staying well hydrated	Helps your kidneys flush out uric acid	2–3 litres per day consistently — not just during attacks

4 Diet and Lifestyle

Diet changes alone rarely prevent gout attacks — but they reduce attack frequency and improve how well medication works. Focus on overall healthy eating rather than trying to eliminate individual foods.

Food / Lifestyle Factor	Effect on Uric Acid	Practical Guidance
High-purine meats (red meat, offal)	Increases uric acid	Limit to 1–2 times per week
Shellfish and oily fish	Moderately increases uric acid	Moderate intake — no need to cut out completely
Beer and spirits	Strongly increases uric acid	The biggest dietary trigger — reduce significantly
Wine	Modest increase	Less harmful than beer, but still worth limiting
Cherries / cherry extract	May reduce uric acid and attack frequency	Worth including regularly — evidence is modest but it's safe

Food / Lifestyle Factor	Effect on Uric Acid	Practical Guidance
Low-fat dairy (milk, yoghurt)	Reduces uric acid — protective	Include regularly as part of a balanced diet
Vitamin C	Modestly reduces uric acid	500 mg supplement or a daily portion of citrus fruit
Sugary drinks and fruit juice (fructose)	Significantly increases uric acid	Avoid — fructose is a major but often overlooked driver
Coffee	Modestly reduces uric acid	Regular coffee drinkers have lower gout risk — a reassuring finding

5 Exercise and Foot Care During and After Attacks

Phase	Activity Guidance	Footwear and Foot Care
During an acute attack	Rest the affected joint — avoid putting weight through it if the big toe or foot is involved	Wide, open footwear or sandals; your orthotics may need to come out temporarily
Settling (days 3–7)	Gentle movement once pain begins to ease — try small range-of-motion exercises	Resume orthotics once comfortable; choose footwear that fits any residual swelling
Between attacks	Regular low-impact exercise is ideal — swimming and cycling are excellent choices	Supportive footwear; custom orthotics reduce load through the big toe joint
Long-term	Exercise helps manage weight, which directly reduces uric acid levels	Build back up gradually after each attack before returning to full activity

Key Takeaways

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Gout is a medical condition, not a lifestyle choice — most people need long-term medication alongside lifestyle changes. Starting urate-lowering therapy can feel counterintuitive (attacks may temporarily increase at first) but it is the most effective way to stop future attacks.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

The foods and drinks that matter most are beer, spirits, and sugary drinks — these raise uric acid more than most foods. On the positive side, cherries and low-fat dairy are genuinely protective and worth including regularly.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Protect your feet between attacks — custom orthotics reduce the load through the big toe joint and can reduce the mechanical trigger that makes crystals more likely to form there.