

CLEARING DOUBTS ON GOUT

Although regarded as the most common and treatable inflammatory arthritis worldwide, a considerable number of Malaysians still suffer from gout attacks and its more chronic form, gouty arthritis, due to a lack of understanding of the disease. **Dr Raveendran Ramachandran**, a Consultant Rheumatologist and Physician in Subang Jaya Medical Centre (SJMC) shares with us his experience treating gouty arthritis patients and the risk factors of getting the disease.

Text Eswaren Sekar

In Malaysia, it is quite common to find gout patients; all one has to do is ask around in a room and surely enough at least one person would personally know someone suffering from gout. The disease affects Malaysians of all age groups as familial predisposition is one of the major risk factors of gout. That means some Malaysians are simply more prone to experiencing gout attacks and gouty arthritis during their lifetime.

In a study published in the *Asian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences* in 2019, researchers at the Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun, Perak found that the mean age of gout patients was 53 years old, with an average duration of disease of more than 10 years, and, with men predominantly affected.

"This is mainly because women in the reproductive age group are protected from gout, as their oestrogen naturally causes uric acid, the main culprit of gout to be flushed out via the urine. However, this also means less oestrogen equals more uric acid thus making postmenopausal women to become more susceptible to gouty arthritis," explains Dr Raveendran.

DISEASE OF KINGS

Indeed, uric acid is the main cause of gout attacks and gouty arthritis. A by-product of purine metabolism, which is the synthetisation of purine, found in high concentrations in meat and meat products, it is normally excreted by the kidneys. Unfortunately, in the case of gout, overproduction of uric acid forms crystals which are deposited inside the joints, causing inflammation, swelling, and excruciating pain.

Gout is regarded as one of the oldest diseases known to mankind and in the past gained the moniker "disease of kings", for afflicting the wealthy who practised a lavish diet and alcohol consumption. In the past, gouty arthritis was also known to be a leading cause of painful and disabling chronic arthritis, but in current times the disease can be well-controlled thanks to advances in medical research.

CATCHING THE SIGNS

Nonetheless, what's most important is to catch the early signs of the disease for optimum treatment.

"The most common sign is the swelling of the of the big toe, which becomes swollen and very painful. This sudden swelling, also known as "podagra", usually occur very quickly and often happen overnight, lasting for days to weeks

if not treated. The triggers for these attacks include dehydration, consumption of sweet drinks, alcohol, red meat, and seafood," says Dr Raveendran.

Gout can also affect other joints like the ankle, knee, wrist, and fingers, while the pain could become so painful to the point that even the touch of a bedsheet becomes unbearable. During such attacks, it is recommended to rest until the pain subsides and to see a healthcare professional for treatment to reduce the pain and inflammation. The medication may have side effects like abdominal pain and are meant to be used only for a short term.

TREATING GOUT

Treatment for gout attacks and gouty arthritis also differ according to the severity of the disease.

"When the gout pain is mild and infrequent, most of the time the specialist would try to treat the patient with a dietary and lifestyle change. However, when the gout attacks are more frequent due to very high uric acid level, the treatment would involve medications. In the instances when patients also develop kidney

stones and severe joint damage, surgery may be required," clarifies Dr Raveendran.

The treatment prescribed depends on the frequency and severity of the gout attack. Anti-inflammatory medications treat acute gout attacks while Urate Lowering Therapy (ULT) lowers uric acid levels and reduces the risk of recurrent gout attacks as well as the risk of complications from gout, such as the development of tophi, which are small lumps forming under the skin from urate crystal deposits.

In that case, what can be done to reduce the risk of gout attacks and gouty arthritis?

Dr Raveendran explains: "We always advise patients to drink lots of water, at least 2 to 4 litres of fluid per day. High risk individuals must also eat a balanced diet consisting of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat food, while getting protein from low-fat dairy products.

Food with high purine concentration such as red meat and seafood should be avoided. If possible, limit or avoid alcohol consumption as they can cause a buildup of uric acid. Last but not least, maintain a healthy body weight with regular exercise and an active lifestyle." ©



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