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Like Charlemagne, You 've Got Gout

By TIMOTHY GOWER

JAMES HARRISON felt the first twinge of pain in his ankle one day four years ago, while playing basketball. In no time, the minor ache worsened to flaming-hot agony and spread to his big toe. "I was in excruciating pain," said Mr. Harrison, 36, a Web site designer from Sims, Ark. Yet X-rays failed to uncover any sign of injury. His doctor sent him home with a prescription for pain relievers and a shrug.

Mr. Harrison ended up hobbling to three doctors without finding the cause of his misery. Eventually, the aching and swelling migrated to other joints, alternating between his knees and elbows, the left side one day, the right side the next. Finally, he consulted an orthopedist, who took one look at the red, inflamed skin around Mr. Harrison's big toe and said, "You have gout."

Mr. Harrison's experience was not unusual, say doctors who study gout. Although the incidence of the disease has doubled in the United States since 1969, general practitioners often fail to suspect it when patients complain of aching joints. Dubbed "the disease of kings and the king of diseases," gout has long had the reputation as a condition primarily afflicting men who are well off. A short list of noted sufferers includes Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, Henry VIII, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Voltaire, Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin.

Today, about 3.4 million men from all walks of life in the United States have the disease some patients call "gouch," making it the most common form of inflammatory arthritis among males. Men develop gout twice as often as women do.

Gout can produce mild pain, but patients often describe it as the worst physical anguish they have ever experienced. Untreated joints throb endlessly and become so tender that they explode with pain at the slightest touch.

It occurs when levels of uric acid in the blood rise too high, causing needlelike crystals to form in the joints and connective tissue. Whiteblood cells attack the crystals, producing swelling and inflammation. Gout can strike elbows, wrists, fingers and ankles, but for some reason about 75 percent of patients develop burning pain in one or both big toes.

No one is sure why, said Dr. H. Ralph Schumacher of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. One theory is that the relatively cool temperatures of extremities like the big toe promote the growth of uric acid crystals. Another theory proposes that joints that endure the most wear and tear may be most vulnerable.



The body makes uric acid as it breaks down chemicals called purines, which are components of DNA that are released during the natural turnover of cells in all human tissue. Normally, uric acid is excreted in urine, but if the body makes too much or the kidneys fail to eliminate enough, uric acid builds up in the blood, resulting in a condition called hyperuricemia. Many people who have hyperuricemia never develop symptoms, but as uric acid levels climb, so does the risk of gout.

Soaring obesity rates are a major reason the incidence of gout is rising, said Dr. Hyon K. Choi, an epidemiologist and a rheumatologist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Simply put, more body tissue means more purines, which results in high uric acid levels. In a study published in April in the Archives of Internal Medicine, Dr. Choi and his colleagues found that men who gained 30 pounds or more after age 21 doubled their risk for gout.

Purines are also present in a wide variety of foods, including meats and seafood. Moreover, alcohol interferes with the body's ability to excrete uric acid.

Throughout history, doctors thought that gout disproportionately afflicted the rich because poor people could not afford to overindulge in these foods and beverages. This theory had little scientific support, however, until last year, when Dr. Choi and his team published a pair of papers confirming these suspicions.

In a study involving more than 47,000 men, Dr. Choi showed that males who ate the most meat were 41 percent more likely to develop gout than those who consumed meat sparingly or not at all. An appetite for seafood increased the risk 51 percent. Men with gout may wonder whether eating fish for its reputed cardiovascular benefits is worth the risk.

"That's a tricky one," said Dr. Choi, who suggested that fish-oil capsules may be a compromise.

Likewise, Dr. Choi found that men who drink alcohol increased their risk, too, only if they drank beer or spirits; wine drinkers had no greater incidence of gout than nondrinkers. Conversely, men who consumed the most vegetables were 27 percent less likely to develop gout, while drinking two or more eight-ounce glasses of skim milk a day cut the risk in half. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, like indomethacin and naproxen, are the preferred treatment for acute gout pain, said Dr. Naomi Schlesinger of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick. Rest and applying ice to the sore joint help, too. Some doctors prescribe corticosteroids or colchicine to treat gout pain as well.

The main strategy for thwarting gout flare-ups, however, is to drain the fuel that causes them in the first place. Speeding up the excretion of uric acid or stifling its production causes crystals in the joints to dissolve over time.

"If you can lower uric acid, you're going to prevent gout," Dr. Schlesinger said.

Lowering uric acid levels may prove to have additional benefits beyond relieving gout, said Dr. Richard J. Johnson of the University of Florida in Gainesville. He pointed out that before drugs were available for lowering uric acid, 90 percent of gout patients eventually developed cardiovascular disease, and 20 percent died of heart attacks.

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