Tips to Help Relieve Stress to Avoid Gout Flares

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Gout and Stress

Gout is a painful experience for anyone that suffers from this chronic medical condition. As uric acid increases in your blood stream, it combines with minerals to form hardened crystals that find their way to your joints. The joints in your big toes are especially vulnerable to gout. When the crystals settle in, they cause inflammation, swelling and pain that is very intense for some.

When pain is limiting, you begin to feel the emotional repercussions of gout. Pain can increase impulsive decision-making, irritability, depression, conflict in relationships, anxiety, decreased optimism and increased negative coping skills like using drugs and alcohol. In short, gout creates stress. To compound matters, stress and gout have a bidirectional relationship. As gout intensifies, so does stress, and as stress increases, so does symptoms of gout.

Limiting gout is not always such an easy task. To make the most of your time, energy and resources, consider an approach that addresses the physical and psychological. Begin by avoiding triggers that create flares before shifting focus to reducing your stress and tension. With this combination treatment, you can gain control over your gout.

Avoid Flares

Since the level of uric acid is directly related to gout flares, take steps to reduce the amount of acid in your body while increasing your body's ability to remove excess acid. Want to take a natural approach to reduce gout attacks? Here's how:

- **Decrease caffeine** – Quite simply, your body breaks down caffeine into uric acid. More acid means more pain. Work to reduce or avoid all together for best results.
- **Decrease alcohol** – When your body processes alcohol, it creates byproducts that disrupt the capability of removing uric acid. As with caffeine, reduce or eliminate your consumption.
- **Decrease purine** – Purine is a certain nucleic acid that becomes converted into uric acid. Avoid foods high in purine like sardines, anchovies, organ meats and red meat to reduce uric acid.
- **Decrease salt/ increase water** – The uric acid uses sodium to crystalize. Eating too much salt increases the risk of crystals forming. Drinking more water helps to flush your system of salt and dilutes the acid so that the two do not bind so easily.
- **Decrease weight** – People with gout tend to be overweight. Modifying your diet and losing weight in a slow and steady way will help decrease the uric acid. Be cautious, though. Quick weight loss is associated with increased uric acid levels that trigger flares.
- **Decrease sugar** – Fructose is linked to gout, and though it occurs naturally in fruit, most people consume it in the form of high-fructose corn syrup. Be sure to check labels as high-fructose corn syrup is found in many surprising foods. Eating less sugar can cut down the risk of gout dramatically.
- **De-stress** – You already know that stress is bad for your body. Stress can create excess uric acid by

decreasing your body's ability to excrete it.

Ways to De-stress

Stress is harmful, but reducing stress is easier said than done most of the time. For some people with gout, going to the movies, meeting friends for dinner or getting a massage are enough to remove the unwanted stress from their life. Others need more intensive and targeted treatment in the form of relaxation techniques to fully reduce stress.

Relaxation techniques prove useful for many conditions including anxiety, depression, chronic pain, menopause and gout. They are low risk, high reward, inexpensive and widely available. Therapists use relaxation techniques daily to help people manage their symptoms. This means that even if gout symptoms do not improve, your mental health will. Here's how:

- **Deep breathing** – Diaphragmatic or deep breathing is the first relaxation technique to learn because it is the simplest and most basic skill for reducing stress. Many other techniques build upon the deep breathing skills. Begin by assuming a comfortable position either sitting or lying down. The goal is to fill your lungs entirely by using your diaphragm to suck in air. Most people move their shoulders when breathing deeply but this only partially fills lungs. Work to extend the seconds inhaling and exhaling to increase oxygen in your body. Put your right hand on your stomach and left handle on your chest. As you breathe in, feel your right hand moving while your left remains still. Five seconds in and seven seconds out is a great goal but three in and five out might be your starting point. Deep breathing provides access to extra oxygen which allows your heart to slow down. Repeat as needed.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation** – PRM is a systematic way of tensing and relaxing muscle groups up and down your body. Where do you hold your stress and tension? Target these areas to find relief. Begin with some deep breathing to slow down your body and gain awareness of your physical state. Tense and hold the muscles for five seconds and then relax as you feel the tension melting away. Contract and relax each area twice before moving on to the next. Tensing the area will depend on the area itself. Your arms can be tensed by making a fist. Your legs can be tensed by extending them straight out while sitting. Moving your eyebrows up then squinting your eyes can reduce forehead tension. Look for full progressions online to learn more.

- **Guided imagery** – Guided imagery involves listening to a script or reading a script yourself. These serve as a distraction from your stressors and allow your mind and body to become refreshed. They usually involve thinking about yourself on a tropical island or a relaxing destination. Countless examples can be found online of both written and audio scripts. Find one or many that work for you.
- **Autogenic training** – Autogenics is a type of self-hypnosis where you repeat a series of phrases to yourself. These messages work to retrain your thinking to be more desirable while training your body to be more relaxed. A quick online search will yield great scripts to use as a guide. Autogenics allows for modification and manipulation to obtain your desired effect.

Keys to Better Relaxation

Relaxation is sometimes not the easy thing to do but risks associated with stress make it worth trying and re-trying until you produce the desired effects. If you have tried the above with poor success, use the tips below to achieve your relaxation goal.

- **Prevention**. Typically, beginners wait too long to use a relaxation technique. This ensures defeat and can distort your view of relaxation to be more negative. Once you have mastered relaxation, you can avoid even the worst stressors. When you are a beginner, though, you must practice these techniques during periods of low stress and calm. It can seem counterintuitive to use relaxation when you are already relaxed, but this strategy will better prepare you for future stress. You can use relaxation for prevention, not just damage control.
- **Frequency**. Reserve passing judgment prematurely with relaxation techniques. Just because you tried one without success 10 years ago does not mean that it is not worth doing now. Relaxations work to

retrain your body and your mind. This process takes time. Even the simplest deep breathing may take weeks or months to utilize effectively and longer to master. When you think about given up, consider the pain associated with gout and find motivation to practice relaxation.

- **Best choice.** The relaxations previously listed are only the tip of what is available to you. Mindfulness, meditations and exercises like yoga provide a relaxation effect. There are even more offered when you consider the near endless variations. Find the best technique for your situation and state. Are you feeling physically tense? Try a progressive muscle relaxation. Are you feeling more pessimistic? Try a guided imagery about a favorite destination. Is it very difficult for you to clear your mind? Autogenic training might be right for you. Relaxations are like ordering from a menu. Find the one that fits your appetite best.
- **Time**. If you struggle to find the success with different techniques, try different times of the day to practice. If you have been using them in the morning, try the evening or throughout the day. Changing the length of time could be helpful as well. Start with shorter durations and build up in five minute increments. Focus on what is going to be best for you.
- **Setting**. As with the previous tip, variety will be your friend when learning relaxation. Test different areas to compare and contrast benefits to others you have tried. Try the bedroom, bathroom, closet or right beside a busy intersection. Relaxation can be found in strange and unexpected places. You can set the scene by adding music and candle light or enjoy perfect silence in a pitch-dark room.

Conclusion

No one likes gout and no one would choose to have it. Work to gain some control over your situation by knowing you triggers. Modifying your behavior could trigger fewer flares. After the flares are managed, shift your focus to the aspect of stress. Finding success with relaxation will lead to less stress. Less stress leads to less discomfort and pain. Less pain equals a happier you.