

YOUR GOUT QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Gout & Pacific Islanders



Perspective from **BARRY SHIBUYA, MD**

How common is gout among Pacific Islanders?

I suspect gout is more common among Pacific Islanders than we know, due to genetic and environmental factors. I practiced in San Francisco a few years before returning to Hawaii in 2018. In Hawaii, among Pacific Islanders, I've observed a higher prevalence of gout as well as more severe disease.

Unfortunately, not many quality studies of gout in this community have been done. We need more research so we can help patients prevent or better manage the condition.

How do Pacific Islanders experience gout differently?

Living on an island creates unique challenges. Healthier foods, like fruits and vegetables, are more expensive than they are on the mainland because they need to be imported. Without access to healthy options, Pacific Islanders face a greater risk of developing gout or, if they already have it, of increasing its severity.

What are some commonalities among your patients?

Many of my patients with gout have comorbidities, particularly those that raise their risk of cardiovascular disease. I often see high blood pressure, high blood sugar levels and insulin resistance. Many patients are also overweight.

Do Pacific Islanders with gout face stigma?

Pacific Islanders tend to be more private about what they see as personal matters. This can be a problem when they develop a chronic medical condition like gout.

Patients may stay quiet and attribute their gout purely to poor diet choices, even though we know genetics play a role. Then they may manage it by simply visiting the ER. Some fall back on coping mechanisms – alcohol, in some cases – which only makes matters worse.

Proper screening and proactive conversations with health care providers can help patients avoid gout or lessen its severity. Successful gout management is possible.

What treatment barriers do Pacific Islanders face?

There are only a handful of rheumatologists who practice in Hawaii. This requires many patients to travel long distances for care – which they might not be able to afford.

Another issue is that many patients with gout in Hawaii don't have adequate insurance. So, even for those who can travel, medical expenses may still be unaffordable.

Lack of access to specialists forces many patients with gout to turn to emergency rooms, which don't address patients' underlying issues.

Why is proper treatment for gout so critical?

Gout is very serious. It can be debilitating for patients who don't get adequate treatment. When patients are treated holistically, their uric acid levels go down, their kidneys get better, their cardiovascular health improves – life becomes more manageable all around. That's why it's so important that patients discuss gout proactively with their health care providers, seek medical treatment and embrace a healthy lifestyle. Gout can be managed with treatment.