

...be a secret gout sufferer

What do you do when an agonising medical condition provokes not sympathy but mocking laughter? You keep it to yourself, says the writer *Rob McGibbon*

I have a painful secret: I get gout. I have had 24 attacks since 2002, mostly in my ankles. I know that because I have kept a gout diary — my contribution to “misery lit”. I will save the pain until later, but first I need to explain why I have kept this awful affliction quiet.

The problem with gout is that it makes people snigger. It’s hard to think of another serious health issue that encourages such mirth. I vividly remember when this first happened to me, early on in my 16 long years of intermittent hell. I had to interview an actor, who should remain nameless, but won’t because it’s so annoying when people say that: it was Nigel Pivaro, Terry Duckworth from Coronation Street.

I limped into our meeting and naively told the truth about my condition, as my left foot throbbed inside a loosely laced trainer. He laughed throatily, then lapsed into a pantomime skit of a bonkers, cheek-puffing general: “What-ho, Brigadier! Have you been attacking that orful port at the club?”

Ha ha. I’m all for heartless, laddish banter, but I was a touch

taken aback. Nigel was not alone. That same week I mentioned gout to one or two friends and they all reacted flippantly. As I cancelled golf, a mate started chuckling and cut away from the phone to yell this hilarious news to his wife.

This early reaction made me feel embarrassed, so I decided to keep it private, except for those closest to me. Whenever I have had to venture out with obvious signs — crutches or a severe limp are a giveaway — I’ve fudged the reason or lied. My neighbours must think I am more injury-prone than Frank Spencer.

The jokes from friends have eased, although there is still little sympathy. But the disparaging ignorance of others is widespread. My most recent gout attack was in November. To test if attitudes had changed at all, I told a friend why I was really cancelling dinner.

“Gout?” he replied, genuinely challenged. “I thought people got that in Victorian times, or during the plague.”

Gout has a PR problem. For starters, it’s such an odd, blunt word. It might help if it was rebranded to something longer and more medical. Things certainly aren’t helped when some newspapers insist on using Henry VIII to illustrate every gout

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article. It is often described as the “disease of kings”, so mad Henry is our poster boy.

The unavoidable reason why gout sufferers are ribbed is its age-old association with port-nosed boozers and gluttonous high living. *Mea culpa* — I’m pretty certain they’re the main reasons why I suffer, but it isn’t necessarily quite so simplistic. I have had four gout attacks brought on by strenuous exercise, such as football or long bike rides.

My condition wasn’t diagnosed at once. But eventually a private consultant explained that I have a genetic predisposition to gout that renders my kidneys unable to flush out uric acid fast enough. At times my body is like a cup of tea that cannot absorb any more teaspoons of sugar — except it’s acid. That metaphor cost me £250. Feel free to pass it on.

Gout is inflammatory arthritis, the supermax kind with extra wincing on the side. It’s not the achy stuff that makes old folk grumble. It is caused when your blood is overrun with uric acid, which is generated when the body breaks down purines. A sweeping array of foods are rich in purines, as are most forms of alcohol. The excess uric acid gets deposited around a joint and turns into urate crystals, which cause inflammation and bring on a gout attack. The big toe is the most famous location, but it also hits ankles, knees, elbows, even fingers.

Now for the pain: trust me, it is horrendous. Mine often begins suddenly across the top of a foot and panic sets in as it gradually spreads to the toes. Within five or six hours, the entire foot and ankle is transformed into a hot, bloated, pulsating red sausage of agony. Traditionally, the fierce grip of gout arrives in the dead of night. My wife will hear me dragging a foot across the floorboards and mutter, “Oh, nooo,” but she’s used to it.

I was on crutches with gout when I proposed in Paris in 2006. Our ascent to Sacré-Coeur did wonders for my upper-body definition. In 2015, a party-heavy trip to New York saw me convulsed in distress throughout the flight home. I thought my foot would explode. I needed the beeping golf-cart transfer from the gate at Heathrow. Humiliating.

Forget sleeping with gout. You must lie there as motionless as possible, watching the dawn



SORE POINT
Rob, 53, says that gout has a “PR problem” and hopes we can move beyond its comical associations with upper-class overindulgence

arrive with a foot dangling off the end of the bed to cool it down. Nothing must touch it. I mostly spend the first two days forcing my foot as often as I dare into a washing-up bowl of icy water.

If I’m lucky, this acute phase lasts 48 hours. All trace is gone within a week to 10 days. The trouble is, to accompany each gout bout, you get flu-like symptoms and fever because your system is all mashed.

When you join the gout club, you get a watchlist of foods that have varying levels of purines. It is shockingly long. Red zone: offal, game, oily fish, seafood, yeast. Amber: all meat and poultry, spinach, asparagus, peas, beans, cauliflower, mushrooms, fizzy sweet drinks. It goes on and on. You wonder what’s left. Salad, yoghurt, cheese, pasta, eggs, fruit and some veg, that’s what. Super.

Then it gets to the contraband that really matter, at least to me: beer and wine. And, of course, port, which I hate anyway.

It’s all bit depressing at first. You think you will never demolish a steak with a bottle of claret again, or a seafood platter served over ice in a sunny harbour. Anything north of three pints these days and alarm bells ring in my head. In the grand schemes of things, this is hardly the greatest burden, but the daft old ways of getting legless now take on a sinister reality, which can be a bore.

You soon learn to keep out of the red zone of food and alcohol except on rare occasions, and staying dry for at least a few days a week is vital. Conversely, being hydrated (drinking buckets of water) is essential. But there are upsides to all this and, bizarrely, gout has had a positive impact on my health. My GP says that I am in decent shape for 53, so I should be OK in later life, when my hard-drinking pals will probably be dropping like addled flies.

These days, I get one attack a year, two if I’m unlucky, or stupid.

I started taking Allopurinol in 2010, after finally accepting that lifestyle change was simply not enough. Two little white 100mg pills a day help neutralise the uric acid, but it is no panacea.

Medical research on gout seems to be sketchy and largely out of date, but all indicators suggest the condition is on the rise. Apparently, one in 40 people in the UK get it, mostly men. I find this extraordinary, especially given the amount of inveterate boozers I know, because I have yet to meet a fellow sufferer. Maybe they’re all keeping it secret.

As for the image of gout, I hope it can change. Maybe people can avoid the crass jokes. Simply say, “Ooh, you poor soldier. When you’re up and about, let’s have a beer.” That little hope of a better day will ease the pain ■
*Rob’s childhood memoir, 1979 — Diary of a F*****-Up English Schoolboy Aged 13½, is unfolding daily at robmcgibbon.com*

BURNING ISSUE

153%

The increase in recorded cases of gout in England, 2011-18

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