I was raised an Adventist and have always been health-conscious and avoided harmful foods. So I was totally shocked when my doctor diagnosed a painful swollen foot as gout. He said the condition is not diet-related but hereditary. What is the truth here? Numerous articles on the net seem to indicate that certain foods can cause or at least precipitate an attack.

Gout was first described by Hippocrates approximately 2,500 years ago. It is a disease that has both acute and chronic phases. The well-known acute phase is the acutely swollen, red, and extremely painful joint—classically the large toe, but any joint may be involved. The pain can be so severe that even the lightest covering (sock or bed sheet) cannot be tolerated by the patient.

Your doctor is correct. Gout is usually a genetically determined disease involving the metabolism of protein-related substances called purines. There is an increase and accumulation of uric acid first in the blood and then in the joints. This occurs either because of increased production or reduced excretion of the uric acid. There are instances in which other conditions cause increased uric acid production with a similar clinical picture to the gout that are genetic or hereditary. This is termed secondary gout. Examples of this include diseases such as leukemia, lymphomas, and psoriasis. Chemotherapy can also result in elevated uric acid because of increased cell destruction.

Gout is a disease that affects mainly men and, to a lesser extent, postmenopausal women. The major uric acid production (two thirds plus) arises from the body's manufacture of purines. Approximately one third of the body's uric acid is produced from dietary sources. This brings us to another aspect of your question. Since dietary purines account for a relatively small proportion of daily uric acid production, diet is not the primary cause or precipitant of the acute gout attack. Foods that are high in purines include anchovies, sweetbreads, liver, kidneys (organ meats), and leafy vegetables such as spinach. Individual patients can usually identify whether a specific food article precipitates a gout attack. Experience in one rural area revealed an increase in gout attacks during cherry and asparagus seasons respectively. This varies from patient to patient. Anchovies and organ meats are possibly the most consistent culprits. Alcohol
should be avoided entirely as it is clinically the most important stimulus for the production of uric acid.

Taking all of these factors into account, your question and concerns regarding lifestyle and gout are well taken. It is all the more important to understand that primary gout, the most common form of this disease, is a genetic disorder. Your healthful Adventist lifestyle has not failed you. We cannot avoid diseases that are, so to speak, “common to man,” because we do not get to choose our genetic makeup. This reminds us of the grace we each need to live our lives in a world that has become so changed from the ideal since the entrance of sin.

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While this column is provided as a service to our readers, Drs. Landless and Handysides unfortunately cannot enter into personal and private communication with our readers. We recommend that you consult with your personal physician on all matters of your health.