Diagnosis and Management of Gout Nephropathy

Winno Pradana Utomo[1], Ratih Tri Kusuma Dewi[1,2],*

[1]Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia, 57126
[2]Department of Internal Medicine, Dr. Moewardi General Hospital, Surakarta, Indonesia, 57126

*Correspondence: Ratih Tri Kusuma Dewi, ratihsolo@staff.uns.ac.id, Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction: Gout is a crystal-induced arthritis caused by the deposition of monosodium urate (MSU) and is frequently linked to chronic kidney disease (CKD). The bidirectional relationship between gout and CKD increases morbidity, complicates diagnosis, and necessitates integrated management strategies.

Methods: This is a narrative review of recent literature, synthesized into a practical framework for internists, emphasizing the ACR/EULAR criteria, the roles of musculoskeletal ultrasonography and dual-energy CT (DECT), and the implications of renal comorbidity for therapeutic choices

Results: Gouty nephropathy involves both crystal-dependent mechanisms, such as tubular obstruction by urate crystals, and crystal-independent mechanisms, including endothelial dysfunction and the activation of inflammatory, oxidative, and RAAS pathways. In practice, the confirmation of MSU through synovial fluid analysis remains the gold standard. When aspiration is not feasible, musculoskeletal ultrasonography (showing the "double-contour sign") and DECT are used to detect urate deposition and map the disease burden. For acute flares, first-line therapy includes NSAIDs, low-dose colchicine, or glucocorticoids, which should be initiated as early as possible. For long-term prevention, a treat-to-target strategy is employed to lower serum urate levels to <6 mg/dL (or ≤5 mg/dL in severe cases) using xanthine oxidase inhibitors or uricosurics, accompanied by flare prophylaxis for 3–6 months. For renal assessment, biomarkers such as cystatin C and NGAL offer early detection of tubulointerstitial injury beyond conventional markers

Conclusions: A multimodal approach that integrates crystal confirmation, urate-specific imaging, flare control, and target-based urate lowering, alongside the screening and optimization of kidney function, is essential to slow progression and improve outcomes in gout nephropathy.

Keywords: Chronic Kidney Disease; cystatin C; gout; NGAL; uric acid nephropathy.

INTRODUCTION

Gout is a common form of inflammatory arthritis caused by the deposition of monosodium urate (MSU) crystals within joints and other tissues, a process driven by chronic hyperuricemia [1]. The kidneys play a central role in this condition, as they are responsible for the majority of uric acid excretion and are crucial for maintaining urate homeostasis [2]. Consequently, a strong, bidirectional relationship exists between gout and chronic kidney disease (CKD) [3]. Kidney dysfunction is highly prevalent among individuals with gout, with some studies indicating that up to 24% of patients with an estimated Glomerular Filtration Rate (eGFR) below 60 mL/min/1.73 m^2 have gout [4]. Conversely, gout and hyperuricemia are recognized risk factors for the development and progression of CKD, creating a complex clinical challenge that increases morbidity [5].

Globally, the burden of gout has been increasing, with a prevalence ranging from 1-4% [6]. The condition is frequently accompanied by comorbidities such as hypertension and metabolic syndrome, which are also independent risk factors for CKD, further complicating patient management [7]. While the definitive diagnosis of gout relies on the identification of MSU crystals in synovial fluid—the established gold standard—this procedure is not always feasible [8]. In such cases, advanced imaging techniques like musculoskeletal ultrasonography, which can identify the characteristic "double-contour sign," and dual-energy computed tomography (DECT), which specifically maps urate deposits, have become vital tools for accurate diagnosis [9]. Given the intricate link between renal function and urate metabolism, a comprehensive understanding of the pathophysiology, modern diagnostic approaches, and personalized therapeutic strategies is essential for managing gout nephropathy effectively. This is particularly important to slow disease progression and improve both renal and cardiovascular outcomes in this high-risk population [10].

METHODS

This is a narrative review of recent literature. The information was synthesized into a practical framework for internists. This review emphasizes the ACR/EULAR criteria, the roles of musculoskeletal ultrasonography and dual-energy CT (DECT), and the implications of renal comorbidity for therapeutic choices.

RESULTS

The literature review demonstrates that gout nephropathy is a complex condition involving multiple pathological mechanisms, which informs both its diagnosis and management. The findings are synthesized below, covering its pathophysiology, diagnostic modalities, and therapeutic strategies.

Pathophysiology of Gout Nephropathy

Gout-related kidney damage occurs through two primary pathways: crystal-dependent and crystal-independent mechanisms.

Crystal-Dependent Mechanisms: This pathway involves the direct consequences of monosodium urate (MSU) crystal deposition in the kidneys. In acute urate nephropathy, a massive precipitation of crystals in the collecting tubules leads to obstruction and acute kidney injury, often seen in contexts of high cell turnover like tumor lysis syndrome. In chronic urate nephropathy, long-term crystal deposition in the renal interstitium and medulla triggers a chronic inflammatory response, characterized by granuloma formation and giant cells, which ultimately leads to interstitial fibrosis and progressive CKD.

Crystal-Independent Mechanisms: Hyperuricemia can induce renal damage even without crystal formation. High levels of soluble uric acid promote endothelial dysfunction, stimulate the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system (RAAS), and reduce the production of nitric oxide, leading to afferent arteriolar vasoconstriction, reduced renal blood flow, and glomerular hypertension. At a cellular level, uric acid triggers inflammation and oxidative stress by activating pathways such as the NOD-like receptor protein 3 (NLRP3) inflammasome and Toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4), contributing to tubular injury and fibrosis.

Diagnostic Approaches for Gout and Gout Nephropathy

The diagnosis of gout nephropathy requires a multi-pronged approach, integrating clinical findings with laboratory tests and advanced imaging.

Gold Standard Diagnosis of Gout: The definitive diagnosis of gout is achieved by identifying negatively birefringent, needle-shaped MSU crystals in synovial fluid aspirated from an affected joint or in material from a tophus, as examined under a compensated polarized light microscope.

Advanced Imaging: When joint aspiration is not feasible, imaging plays a crucial role. Musculoskeletal ultrasound is highly effective for detecting urate deposition, with the "double-contour sign" (a hyperechoic layer on the surface of articular cartilage) being a pathognomonic finding. Dual-energy computed tomography (DECT) provides a non-invasive method to specifically detect, visualize, and quantify urate crystal deposits throughout the body, aiding in diagnosis and assessment of disease burden.

Biomarkers for Renal Injury: For the early detection of kidney damage in gout patients, novel biomarkers have shown greater sensitivity than traditional markers. Serum cystatin C is a reliable indicator of GFR, as its levels are not influenced by muscle mass, and it correlates well with declining kidney function in gout patients. Neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin (NGAL) has emerged as a sensitive early biomarker for tubular injury, with elevated urinary levels reflecting tubulointerstitial damage in the context of hyperuricemia.

Kidney Biopsy: Biopsy remains the gold standard for the definitive diagnosis of chronic urate nephropathy. Histopathological examination typically reveals interstitial fibrosis, tubular atrophy, and pathognomonic needle-shaped clefts where urate crystals have dissolved during formalin fixation, often surrounded by a granulomatous inflammatory reaction.

Management Strategies

The management of gout nephropathy is focused on controlling acute flares, implementing long-term urate-lowering therapy (ULT) with a treat-to-target approach, and managing comorbidities.

Acute Flare Management in CKD: First-line therapies for acute gout flares include low-dose colchicine, glucocorticoids (oral or intra-articular), or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). However, in patients with CKD, treatment choices are constrained. NSAIDs are generally avoided in moderate to severe CKD due to the risk of worsening kidney function. Colchicine requires dose adjustment for reduced GFR and is often contraindicated in severe CKD. Consequently, glucocorticoids are frequently the preferred option for managing acute flares in this population.

Urate-Lowering Therapy (ULT): A "treat-to-target" strategy is recommended for long-term management, aiming to maintain a serum uric acid level below 6 mg/dL to dissolve existing crystals and prevent new ones from forming. In patients with severe disease, such as those with tophi, a lower target of ≤5 mg/dL is advised. The primary agents are xanthine oxidase inhibitors (XOIs). Allopurinol is the first-line choice, even in CKD, but must be initiated at a low dose (e.g., 50-100 mg/day) and titrated upwards slowly to achieve the target urate level while monitoring for adverse effects. Febuxostat is a viable alternative, particularly for patients intolerant to allopurinol. Uricosuric agents are generally not recommended in CKD due to diminished efficacy and an increased risk of kidney stones. Importantly, recent major clinical trials have shown that lowering uric acid with allopurinol in patients with asymptomatic hyperuricemia and CKD does not slow the progression of kidney disease, reinforcing guidelines that ULT should be reserved for patients with symptomatic gout (e.g., flares, tophi) rather than for the sole purpose of nephroprotection.

DISCUSSION

The management of gout nephropathy presents a significant clinical challenge, primarily due to the complex, bidirectional relationship between hyperuricemia and chronic kidney disease (CKD) [11, 12]. This review synthesizes current evidence, highlighting a necessary evolution from a disease-centric view to a more holistic

approach that integrates renal function at every step of diagnosis and treatment [13, 14]. The strong epidemiological link, with a high prevalence of CKD in gout patients and vice versa, underscores that these are not merely coexisting conditions but are pathophysiologically intertwined [15, 16]. The mechanisms are now understood to extend beyond simple crystal deposition; crystal-independent pathways involving endothelial dysfunction, RAAS activation, and inflammation are recognized as major contributors to renal damage, complicating the traditional view of gout nephropathy [17, 18]. This nuanced understanding necessitates a shift in clinical practice, moving beyond reactive flare management to a proactive strategy aimed at long-term urate control and comprehensive renal protection.

A significant evolution highlighted by recent literature is in the diagnostic paradigm for gout. While the identification of monosodium urate (MSU) crystals in synovial fluid remains the definitive gold standard, its practical limitations are increasingly acknowledged [19]. The integration of advanced imaging modalities like musculoskeletal ultrasonography and dual-energy CT (DECT) has proven invaluable, especially when joint aspiration is not feasible [20, 21]. Ultrasound, with its ability to detect the pathognomonic "double-contour sign," and DECT, which can specifically map and quantify urate deposits, now serve as crucial adjuncts that fulfill the ACR/EULAR classification criteria, allowing for a confident diagnosis without an invasive procedure [22]. Furthermore, the pursuit of more sensitive biomarkers for early kidney injury, such as serum cystatin C and urinary NGAL, reflects a move towards detecting subclinical tubulointerstitial damage before significant GFR loss occurs [23, 24]. Although these markers are not yet standard in routine practice, their potential to stratify risk and guide earlier intervention is a promising area of research.

The management of gout in patients with pre-existing CKD is fraught with therapeutic limitations, demanding careful, individualized decision-making. For acute flares, the traditional reliance on NSAIDs is largely contraindicated in moderate to severe CKD, shifting the preference towards glucocorticoids or carefully dosed colchicine [13]. However, the cornerstone of management lies in long-term urate-lowering therapy (ULT) guided by a "treat-to-target" strategy, aiming for a serum urate level below 6 mg/dL (or <5 mg/dL in tophaceous disease) to promote crystal dissolution and prevent future attacks [25]. Allopurinol remains the first-line agent, but its use in CKD requires a cautious "start low, go slow" titration approach [13]. Perhaps the most critical recent development in this field is the clarification regarding the treatment of asymptomatic hyperuricemia. The landmark CKD-FIX and PERL trials conclusively demonstrated that lowering serum urate with allopurinol in CKD patients without symptomatic gout did not slow the progression of kidney disease [26, 27]. These findings have been swiftly incorporated into major clinical guidelines, including KDIGO 2024, which now strongly recommends against initiating ULT for the sole purpose of nephroprotection in asymptomatic individuals [28]. This evidence-based shift prevents unnecessary medication exposure and reinforces the principle that ULT should be reserved for patients with a clear diagnosis of gout. Looking ahead, the modest urate-lowering effects of SGLT2 inhibitors, coupled with their proven cardiorenal benefits, present an intriguing therapeutic synergy that may become more prominent in managing patients with gout, diabetes, and CKD [29]. Ultimately, an effective strategy for gout nephropathy is one that is multimodal, combining targeted urate control with aggressive management of comorbidities like hypertension and diabetes, and tailored to the individual patient's level of renal function.

CONCLUSIONS

Gout nephropathy is a critical renal manifestation of gout, driven by both crystal-dependent and crystal-independent mechanisms that lead to progressive kidney damage. The bidirectional relationship between gout and chronic kidney disease (CKD) establishes gout nephropathy as a significant comorbidity that requires early recognition and an integrated management strategy to prevent long-term complications. Effective diagnosis necessitates a comprehensive, multimodal approach. While synovial fluid analysis remains the gold standard for confirming MSU crystals, urate-specific imaging, including musculoskeletal ultrasound and dual-energy CT, plays an essential role when aspiration is not feasible. The management strategy must be equally comprehensive,

focusing on controlling acute flares, implementing a long-term, target-based urate-lowering therapy, and aggressively managing comorbidities. Ultimately, this integrated approach—combining specific diagnosis, flare control, and target-based urate reduction alongside the screening and optimization of kidney function—is essential to slow the progression of renal damage and improve overall patient outcomes.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, W.P.U. and R.T.K.D.; methodology, R.T.K.D.; investigation, W.P.U.; writing—original draft preparation, W.P.U.; writing—review and editing, W.P.U. and R.T.K.D.; supervision, R.T.K.D.; project administration, R.T.K.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article as it is a narrative review of existing literature. All data discussed are sourced from previously published studies, which are cited in the reference section.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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