

# About Unknown Primary Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'About unknown primary cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

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- Screening for unknown primary cancer
- Questions for your doctor

## What is unknown primary cancer?

Cancer of unknown primary means that you have a cancer, but your doctor is not sure where it started from. The place where a cancer starts growing in the body is called the primary site. Cells from this primary site can break away and spread to other parts of the body. They can then form other cancers, which are known as secondary cancers or metastases.

Sometimes secondary cancers are found but the doctor can't find the primary site. This is called cancer of unknown primary (UPC or CUP). The secondary cancer may have grown quickly, whilst the primary

cancer is still very small. Or the primary cancer may have disappeared while the secondary cancers are still growing.

## Examining the cells

A specialist will examine your cancer cells under a microscope to try to find out what type of cell they are. But sometimes cancer cells don't look like any particular type of normal cell. So the doctor can't tell which part of the body they came from.

## Types of unknown primary cancer

Even when a primary tumour cannot be found, better diagnostic tests may now give much more information about it. Your gender, the position of the secondary cancer in the body, and detailed laboratory information about the tumour cells, are important clues in your diagnosis. The type of cancer that you have depends on the types of cell it has developed from. To find this out, your doctor will take a tissue sample (biopsy) and send it to a laboratory where a pathologist will examine it closely.

The tumour cells may look very abnormal under a microscope. The term for this is poorly differentiated or undifferentiated. This means that it may not be possible to



tell what type of cancer it is just by looking at the shape and structure of the cells. The pathologist may also test the tissue sample using antibodies to find tumour markers. Tumour markers are chemicals produced by cancer cells. Some tumour markers are produced by one type of cancer, while others can be made by several different types of cancer. The study of tumour markers is called immunohistochemistry (IHC) and tumour markers are often called IHC markers.

### **Risks and causes of unknown primary cancer**

About 3 out of every 100 cancers diagnosed in the UK are unknown primary cancers. It is a more common situation than many people realise.

We cannot be specific about the possible causes or risk factors of unknown primary tumours, because by definition, we don't know what type of cancer it is. Different cancers can be caused by different things - smoking most often causes lung cancer and the sun causes skin cancer, for example. The 'about cancer' section of CancerHelp UK has more information about what causes cancer.

Being diagnosed with any type of cancer is difficult to accept, and you may find yourself spending a lot of energy trying to work out what caused it. There may come a time when you will have to accept that you may never know. Everyone copes in their own way, but you may feel it more helpful to put your energies into getting through your treatment and staying as well as you can.

### **Screening for unknown primary cancer**

Screening means testing people for a disease when it is in its very early stages, before any symptoms have appeared. Before screening for any type of cancer is possible, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give a positive result in people who do not have cancer.

Because unknown primary cancer can occur anywhere in the body it is not possible to carry out screening. At the moment, there is no screening test that can check a whole body for cancer – for example, there is no blood test that can pick up every type of cancer.

### **What to ask your doctor about cancer of unknown primary**

- How would I know if I have cancer of unknown primary?
- A member of my family has cancer of unknown primary – am I at risk of getting it myself?
- Should I be screened?
- What screening tests are available?
- Are my children more at risk if I have cancer of unknown primary?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of cancer of unknown primary?



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## Notes

### More information

For more information about unknown primary cancer, visit our website  
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on  
**0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

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Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in May 2011.  
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