

# Diagnosing Unknown Primary Cancer - A Quick Guide



## Contents

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

In this information there are sections on

- Tests for unknown primary cancer
- Questions for your doctor

## Tests for unknown primary cancer

If you have symptoms or feel unwell, you usually begin by seeing your GP. Some people first go to their doctor with a very general cancer symptom, such as a lump somewhere in the body or a swollen lymph gland. Your GP will examine you and ask about your general health. They will ask you about your symptoms and will probably want you to have some blood tests. If your doctor suspects that you may have cancer, they will refer you to a specialist at your local hospital.

## At the hospital

At the hospital the specialist will examine you and ask you to have some tests. Scans may show that the lump is likely to be a cancer. Or your doctor may take a sample of cells (biopsy) from the lump or lymph

gland. The biopsy result may show that the cancer is a secondary cancer – meaning that the cancer cells have spread from somewhere else in the body. At first it may not be obvious what type of cancer cells they are and this is called an unknown primary. Your doctor will ask you to have tests to try to find the primary cancer. The tests you may have include

- X-rays
- Scans
- A biopsy, which means removing a sample of tissue and looking at it under the microscope - how the cells look may help your doctor to determine where the cancer of unknown primary started.

Sometimes tests can't find the primary cancer so it continues to be called a cancer of unknown primary. If you have a very advanced cancer when you first go to the doctor, it may not be sensible to put you through endless tests just to find out the cancer type. If the cancer has spread widely around your body, it may make more sense to focus on keeping the cancer under control and treating your symptoms.



## What to ask your doctors about testing for unknown primary cancer

- What tests are you going to do?
  - Why do I have to have these tests?
  - What will the tests show?
  - Will the tests help to find the primary cancer?
  - Are you going to do blood tests that could pick up the primary cancer?
  - What types of primary cancer are you checking for?
  - Are any of these tests painful?
  - Are there any risks with any of these tests?
  - Can I eat normally before these tests?
  - What are the side effects of these tests?
  - Do I have to stay in hospital for any of these tests?
  - Can I bring someone with me when I have the tests?
  - How long will it take to get the results of the tests?
- Who will give me the test results?
  - What happens if you can't find the primary cancer type?

### 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

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in May 2011. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2011. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).