

Cancer of Unknown Primary

If you have questions or concerns after reading this material, talk to your doctor, physician assistant, advance practice nurse or other member of your health care team.

What is cancer of unknown primary?

Cancer of unknown primary is a disease in which cancer cells have been found somewhere in the body, but the place where the cancer first began to grow is unknown. Often when patients are first diagnosed with cancer, the site where the cancer began is found with testing. In other patients (about 2-4 percent of cancer patients), the site where the cancer first began to grow cannot be determined. Therefore, the terms “cancer of unknown primary” or “cancer of unknown origin” is used.

How is cancer of unknown primary diagnosed?

The first step in making a cancer diagnosis is often a biopsy. A biopsy is a procedure where a tissue sample is removed. A biopsy allows a pathologist (a doctor who examines tissue under a microscope) to determine if cancer is present, if the cancer began in the part of the body where the biopsy was taken, or if the cancer spread there. For example, a lung biopsy may find cancer that began in the lung, or it may find cancer that began in another part of the body and then spread to the lung.

What are the symptoms of cancer of unknown primary?

Symptoms experienced by patients are quite varied, depending on where the cancer has spread. Common symptoms that many patients experience include pain, loss of appetite, weight loss and fatigue. It is important that you discuss these and any other symptoms with your health care team.

What kind of evaluation is needed for a patient with cancer of unknown primary?

First, you will need to complete a history and physical examination. Afterwards, other tests may be ordered. These tests may include blood tests, a biopsy and radiology tests (i.e., ultrasound, X-rays, CT scan or MRI). Sometimes other tests are ordered such as a colonoscopy (examination of the large intestine with a camera on a tube).

The tests described below usually do not require an overnight hospital stay. Exploratory surgery is rarely done to diagnose or biopsy tumors.

Blood Tests

Some tumors produce measurable amounts of chemicals known as tumor markers in the blood. Blood tests are often used to monitor the disease process. Other tests measure the functions of the liver, kidneys and other organs.

Computerized Tomography (CT) Scan

By means of a special type of X-ray machine, this test gives detailed pictures of the body and can show how far the cancer has spread. The CT scan is the primary test used to determine the number, size and location of tumors.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

Pictures of the body can be obtained by means of a magnetic field. An MRI is performed when further details of the body are required.

Positron Emission Tomography (PET)

This is a special study using a radioactive glucose (sugar) injected into the body before the exam. The entire body is then imaged, which can detect any abnormal areas that may represent cancer. This test is not appropriate for all patients and can be difficult to interpret. Your doctor will order this test if he or she feels that it may help with finding the primary tumor or confirming sites where the cancer has spread.

Fine Needle Aspiration (FNA) or Biopsy

If a tumor has been identified, it can be sampled in one of two ways: by fine needle aspiration (a needle to remove some cells) or by biopsy (a cut to remove a part of the tumor).

These tests can be done through the skin, with the assistance of an ultrasound or CT scan machine. When an FNA or biopsy is performed in this way, a doctor or other trained health care provider may guide a small needle through the skin after injecting a local anesthetic (numbing medicine). The ultrasound or CT scan helps the doctor find the exact location of the tumor.

Sometimes, a biopsy is obtained by the use of an endoscopy (a tube with a camera) inserted into the mouth or rectum. For some patients, biopsies are obtained in the operating room (exploratory surgery).

Other Tests

If necessary, your doctor may order additional testing to look at specific parts of the body. Other common tests include mammogram, colonoscopy and upper endoscopy.

How is cancer of unknown primary treated?

Patients often wonder, “If the site of the primary cancer cannot be found, can the cancer still be treated?” The answer is yes.

The type of treatment for cancer of unknown primary depends on several factors. One factor is the “extent” of disease, which is determined by how many areas of the body the cancer has spread to and the size of these cancerous areas. Another factor is “site” which involves determining the parts of the body that the cancer is present in, such as the lymph nodes, liver, lungs, bones, etc. The third factor is the patient’s “performance status” which means the status of the patient’s overall health and how well he or she will tolerate treatment.

Patients may receive standard cancer treatments that have been shown to be effective in treatment studies. Some patients may choose to participate in clinical trials. Clinical trials are research studies that try to find a better way to prevent, diagnose or treat a disease. Clinical trials for cancer of the unknown primary are designed to better understand and improve treatments for this challenging cancer. If you are eligible to participate in a clinical trial, your doctor will discuss this in detail with you.

The most commonly used treatment is chemotherapy. However, some patients may be treated with hormone therapy, radiation therapy or surgery. Your health care team will discuss the risks and benefits of treatment options with you and your family. Ask questions about the cancer or its treatment so that you will understand and feel comfortable with your treatment decisions.

Many patients are interested in knowing the statistics regarding prognosis or life expectancy for their cancer. Although statistics can be helpful, they can also be misleading. If you have questions about your prognosis, ask a member of your health care team.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy uses drugs to kill cancer cells. The drugs are given intravenously (through a vein in an arm) or in pill form. There are many different types of chemotherapy with a variety of combinations and side effects. Your doctor will suggest the best chemotherapy based on your individual case.

Talk to your health care team about any questions or concerns you may have about chemotherapy.

Hormone Therapy

This treatment uses hormone drugs to keep cancer cells from growing. The drugs may be given by pill, intravenously or intramuscularly (into a muscle).

Radiation Therapy

This treatment uses radiation waves to kill cancer cells. Radiation treatment is usually administered by a machine directly at the part of the body needing treatment. Following treatment planning session, treatments are usually given on an outpatient basis, typically for two to five weeks. Sometimes radiation is given together with chemotherapy.

Surgery

Surgery is a treatment option for a very small number of patients with cancer of unknown primary. The most common reasons for surgery include obtaining a biopsy or relieving a blockage (of the intestine, for example). Most patients do not have surgery because all of their

tumors cannot be surgically removed. If your doctor feels that surgery is right for you, he or she will refer you to an appropriate surgeon.

How can I learn to live with cancer of unknown primary?

Having cancer can change your life and the lives of your family members in many ways. Patients and their families often feel shock, anger, sadness, fear, frustration and confusion when faced with a cancer diagnosis.

You may have many questions about the cancer, its treatment and its effect on your life. Your health care team can provide answers to many of your questions. You may also have questions about how your job, finances and family relationships will be affected. Your social worker can suggest services and agencies that help provide financial aid, transportation, home care and emotional support.

Living with a serious disease can be difficult and challenging. Many patients find it helpful to share their thoughts and feelings with a professional counselor or with other cancer patients. Others may find it easier to talk with a chaplain or member of the clergy. Your social worker can help you find support groups, counseling services or other related resources.

Who will provide my cancer care at MD Anderson Cancer Center?

At MD Anderson, patients with cancer of unknown primary are seen by physicians and physician assistants in the Gastrointestinal (GI) Center. Other MD Anderson health care professionals may assist in your care within the GI Center or in other clinics at MD Anderson.

The GI Center is located in the Main Building, on Floor 7, near Elevator A.