

# About Cancer of Unknown Primary (CUP)

## A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of 'About cancer of unknown primary -CUP from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- What cancer of unknown primary is?
- Types of cancer of unknown primary
- Risks and causes of cancer of unknown primary
- Screening for cancer of unknown primary
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

### What cancer of unknown primary is?

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 (CUP or UPC). 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 cancer of unknown primary tumour

When the primary tumour cannot be found, important clues to the type of cancer are whether you are male or female and where the secondary tumour is found in the body. A tissue sample (biopsy) and tumour markers may also give more information about the primary cancer tumour.

Most cancers of unknown primary are adenocarcinomas (a type of carcinoma) and they make up between 60% and 90%. But there are other less common types and they include those below.

### Melanoma

In some cases of melanoma skin cancers the primary tumour is not found.

### Lymphoma

Lymphoma can be mistaken for cancer of unknown primary (CUP). Tumour markers can help to make a diagnosis of lymphoma.

### **Rare types of carcinoma**

A very small number of carcinomas of unknown primary may be germ cell tumours. Between 5 and 10% may be squamous cell tumours and about 5% are neuroendocrine tumours.

### **Risks and causes of cancer of unknown primary (CUP)**

About 3 out of every 100 cancers diagnosed (3%) in the UK are unknown primary cancers, where the specialist cannot tell where the cancer started. 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 we don't know what type of cancer it is. Different cancers are caused by different things. Smoking most often causes lung cancer and the sun causes skin cancer, for example.

Being diagnosed with any type of cancer is difficult to accept. You may find yourself spending a lot of energy trying to work out what caused your unknown primary cancer. But it may not be possible to find out. It may help to focus instead on getting through your treatment and staying as well as you can.

### **Screening for cancer of 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.

Giving people regular scans would not help because a cancer must be about the size of a pea before it shows on a scan. And a cancer that is the size of a pea already has billions of cells. So a cancer with millions, or even hundreds of thousands of cells is too small to be seen and would not be found by a scan.

Taking part in national screening programmes for breast, bowel and cervical cancer may help to pick up a cancer in the early stages. It is important to make sure you know the early symptoms to look for and get them checked out if you have them. But unfortunately for some people, there are no early symptoms to warn them that a cancer is developing.

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

- A family member has cancer of unknown primary – am I at risk of getting it myself?
- Should I be screened for cancer?
- 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?

## Notes

**For more information**, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/cancerhelp>

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 trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

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 August 2014. 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. Copyright Cancer Research UK 2014. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and in the Isle of Man (1103)