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About Cancer of Unknown Primary

Learn what cancer of unknown primary is and get the latest key statistics in the US.

Overview and Types

If you have been diagnosed with a cancer of unknown primary or are worried about it, you likely have a lot of questions. Learning some basics is a good place to start.

- [What Is a Cancer of Unknown Primary?](#)

What Is a Cancer of Unknown Primary?

body can become cancer, and can spread to other areas. Cancers often spread from their **primary site** (the part of the body where the cancer started) to one or more **metastatic sites** (other parts of the body). Cancers are named based on their primary site, regardless of where in the body they spread. For example, a lung cancer that spreads to the liver is still classified as lung cancer and not as liver cancer.

Sometimes it's not clear where a cancer may have started. When cancer is found in one or more metastatic sites but the primary site cannot be determined, it is called a **cancer of unknown primary (CUP)** or an **occult primary cancer**. This happens in a small portion of cancers.

Further tests may eventually find the primary site of some of these cancers. When this happens, they are no longer considered a cancer of unknown primary and are renamed and treated according to where they started.

As an example, a person has an enlarged lymph node on the side of their neck. When it is removed, cancer is found. But under the microscope it does not look like a cancer that normally starts in lymph nodes. At this point it might be considered a cancer of unknown primary. The way it looks under the microscope might suggest that the cancer started in the mouth, throat, or voice box (larynx). When this area is examined, a small cancer of the larynx might be found. From then on, the patient is said to have laryngeal cancer rather than a cancer of unknown primary and will get treated for that type of cancer.

In many cases, the source of the cancer is never determined. The most thorough search still might not find the primary site. Even when doctors do autopsies on people who have died of cancer of unknown primary, they are often still unable to find the site where the cancer started.

The main reason to look for the primary site of a CUP is to guide [treatment](#)¹. Since a cancer that starts in one place needs the same treatments when it spreads, knowing where a cancer started tells the doctor what types of treatments to use. This is

To learn more about how cancers start and spread, see [What Is Cancer?](#)²

General cancer types

Cancers are classified by their primary site. They can also be grouped by the types of cells in them, how the cancer cells look under the microscope, and on results of certain lab tests on the cells. Knowing the type of cell might give doctors a clue as to where the cancer started. When the cancer cells closely resemble normal cells of the organ where they start, the cancer is called **well differentiated**. When the cells do not look much like normal cells, the cancers are called **poorly differentiated**. Cancers of unknown primary are often poorly differentiated.

Carcinomas

A carcinoma is a cancer that begins in the cells that line the inside or outside of a body organ. These cells are called **epithelial cells**. There are different types of carcinomas, depending on how the cancer cells look when seen with a microscope. The most common types are squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma.

Squamous cell cancers

Cancers formed by flat cells that look like cells normally found on the surface of the skin or the linings of certain organs are called **squamous cell cancers** or **squamous cell carcinomas**. Squamous cell cancers can start in the mouth, throat, esophagus, lungs, anus, cervix, vagina, and some other organs.

Adenocarcinomas

Cancers that develop from gland cells (cells that secrete a substance) are called **adenocarcinomas**. Gland cells are found in many organs of the body, including some that are not usually thought of as glands. For example, most cancers in the stomach, intestines, and colon are adenocarcinomas. About 4 of 10 lung cancers are adenocarcinomas. Adenocarcinomas can also develop in many other organs.

Other cancer types

Less common types of cancer can develop from other cell types.

- **Lymphomas** develop from cells of the immune system found in lymph nodes and several other organs.

- **Melanomas** develop from cells that produce the skin's tan or brown color.
- **Sarcomas** develop from connective tissue cells that usually are present in tendons, ligaments, muscle, fat, bones, cartilage, and related tissues.
- **Germ cell tumors** can develop in the testes (testicles) in men or the ovaries in women, or in the parts of the body where these organs developed in the fetus.

This list is not intended to include [all types of cancers](#)³ but merely to name the most common ones.

These rare cancers start from cells of the diffuse neuroendocrine system. This system has cells that are like nerve cells in certain ways and like hormone-making endocrine cells in other ways. These cells do not form an actual organ like the adrenal or thyroid glands. Instead, they are scattered throughout other organs like the esophagus, stomach, pancreas, intestines, and lungs. These cancers account for a small number of CUP cases. (Some poorly differentiated cancers are found to be neuroendocrine carcinomas upon further testing.)

Even when doctors don't know where the cancer started, they do their best to classify the type of cancer. This can help them select the best treatment. Some cancers respond very well to specific treatments, so it is very important to classify the cancer as much as possible. This is best done by looking at the cancer under a microscope and doing special tests in the lab (see [Tests for a Cancer of Unknown Primary](#)⁴).

Other types

Lymphoma often does not have a clear primary site, but it's not considered a CUP.

Although the primary site of a melanoma may not be clear, once a cancer is classified as a melanoma, it's no longer called a CUP.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-unknown-primary/treating.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/what-is-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-unknown-primary/detection-diagnosis-staging/how-diagnosed.html

References

⁵Greco FA, Hainsworth JD. Carcinoma of Unknown Primary In: DeVita VT, Lawrence TS, Rosenberg SA, eds. *DeVita, Hellman, and Rosenberg's Cancer: Principles and Practice of Oncology*. 10th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins 2015: 1719-1736.

⁶⁷National Cancer Institute. Physician Data Query (PDQ). *Cancer of Unknown Primary Treatment*. 07/25/2015. Accessed at: <https://www.cancer.gov/types/unknown-primary/hp/unknown-primary-treatment-pdq> on February 9, 2018.

Varadhachary GR, Lenzi R, Raber MN, Abbruzzese JL. Carcinoma of Unknown Primary In: Neiderhuber JE, Armitage JO, Doroshow JH, Kastan MB, Tepper JE, eds. *Abeloff's Clinical Oncology*. 5th ed. Philadelphia, PA. Elsevier: 2014:1792-1803.

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Key Statistics for Cancers of Unknown Primary

- [How common are cancers of unknown primary?](#)

How common are cancers of unknown primary?

The exact number of cancers of unknown primary (CUP) diagnosed each year is unknown, because some cancers start out being diagnosed as unknown primary, but the primary site is found later. Still, the American Cancer Society estimates that about 34,950 cases of cancer of unknown primary will be diagnosed in 2024 in the United States. This number represents about 2% of all cancers. As more sophisticated lab tests become available to determine where a cancer started, the number of cancers of unknown primary may go down.

Visit the [American Cancer Society's Cancer Statistics Center](#)¹ for more key statistics.

Hyperlinks

1. cancerstatisticscenter.cancer.org/

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American Cancer Society. *Facts & Figures 2024*. American Cancer Society. Atlanta. 2024.

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What's New in Cancer of Unknown Primary Research?

It's important for doctors to be able to identify the origin of cancers of unknown primary so that the most effective treatments can be used. Immunohistochemistry and [tumor genomic profiling](#)¹ (also known as **next generation sequencing** of the tumor) can be very helpful in this regard, but they are not yet able to tell where all cancers of unknown primary (CUPs) have started. Newer lab tests now becoming available, and others being studied, will help classify CUP more precisely and predict a patient's prognosis and response to treatment.

Hopefully at some point in the future, the number of cancers of unknown primary will drop dramatically, as doctors will be able to test tumor samples and determine what types of cancer they are.

Treatment

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/precision-medicine.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/clinical-trials.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/immunotherapy.html

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