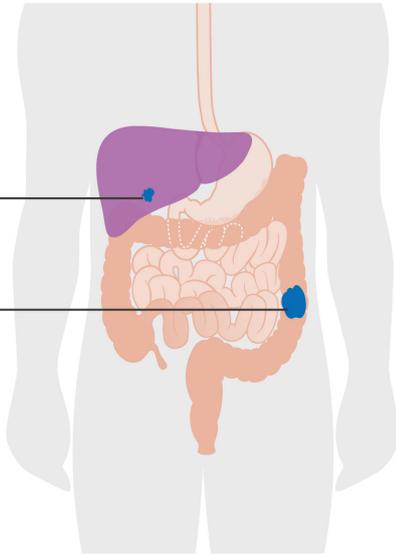


Cancer of unknown primary (CUP)



Secondary cancer in the liver that has spread from the bowel

Primary cancer in the bowel



Cancer Research UK

- the body's immune system killed the primary cancer
- the cancer is in many parts of your body and it's not clear which part was first affected
- the primary cancer was removed during surgery for another condition and the doctors did not know the cancer was there.

Symptoms of CUP

Signs and symptoms of CUP depend on where the cancer has spread. Some signs that may need to be checked include:

- a lump on any part of your body
- pain that is in one part of your body and does not go away
- a cough that does not go away
- change in bowel or bladder habits
- fever for no reason that does not go away
- night sweats
- weight loss for no reason.

This information sheet is about cancer of an unknown primary (CUP). Cancer of an unknown primary is a diagnosis given when doctors are not able to find where a cancer first started.

Cancer can begin anywhere in the body. The place where cancer first grows is called the primary cancer. If the primary cancer spreads to grow in other parts of your body it is called advanced (secondary, metastatic or stage IV) cancer. Cancer cells usually look like the cells in the place that the cancer first started. For example, breast cancer cells may spread to the lungs. Because the cancer began in the breast, the cancer cells in the lungs look like breast cancer cells.

Sometimes, doctors find where cancer has spread to, but can't find where it first began. This type of cancer is called a cancer of unknown primary (CUP).

Why can't the doctors find the primary cancer?

There are different reasons why a primary cancer can't be found:

- the primary cancer is very small

Tests used to find the primary cancer

Your treatment team will begin to find the reason for these symptoms by asking you questions about your health. They may also ask you to have some tests done to give them more information about the symptoms you are experiencing.

The part of the body where the cancer cells are first found may help the doctor decide what tests will be most helpful.

- When cancer is found above the diaphragm (the muscle under the lungs that help with breathing), the primary cancer is likely to be in the upper part of the body such as the lung or breast.
- When cancer is found below the diaphragm, the primary cancer is likely to be in the lower part of the body, such as the pancreas or liver.

The following tests may be done to find where the cancer first started:



- **Biopsy**- a biopsy takes a small sample of tissue from the area being looked at for testing.
- **Blood tests**- before you have treatment a blood sample may be taken, usually through a syringe into a vein in your arm.
- **Scans**- use X-rays, high-frequency sound waves or radioactive substances to make detailed pictures of the inside of your body. Scans commonly used in cancer include MRI, CT, ultrasound, bone, brain and liver scans.
- **Mammogram**- an X-ray of your breast which use a low dose of radiation. The dose of radiation used is very small and highly unlikely to be harmful. It gives information about any lump or other breast changes.
- **Endoscopy**- this is an examination of the upper digestive tract (the stomach and duodenum) using an endoscope – a long soft flexible tube, containing a camera and a light.
- **Tumour marker test** - a tumour marker is a substance found in tissue, blood and other body fluids. It can be used to help diagnose cancer, plan treatment, monitor the effects of treatment or see if cancer has returned.

Staging

The spread of cancer is usually described in stages. The stage of the cancer is used to plan treatment. Because CUP has already spread to another part of the body when it is found, your doctors may describe the cancer as stage 3 or 4. They will use the following information to plan your treatment:

- the place in your body that the cancer is found
- the type of cancer cells
- what the cancer cells look like
- the signs and symptoms the cancer is causing
- the results of any tests you have had
- if the cancer is new or has come back.

Treatment

Because CUP is considered an advanced cancer, treatment is unlikely to cure your cancer. The aim of treatment is to control any symptoms caused by the cancer and to maintain or improve your quality of life. These are the typical treatments for CUP: chemotherapy, radiation treatment, hormone treatment and surgery.

Chemotherapy and targeted treatments

Chemotherapy is the treatment of cancer using anti-cancer

medication. The aim is to kill cancer cells while doing the least possible damage to normal cells. Chemotherapy can be given before or after surgery. It can also be given together with radiation.

Targeted treatment may be used for some types of CUP. This treatment targets the damaged genes or proteins of cancer cells to stop the cancer growing and spreading. These treatments may work even when other treatments do not.

Chemotherapy and targeted treatments have side effects. Treatment may leave you feeling very tired. You might feel sick, have diarrhoea and some people may lose their hair. Most of these side effects go away when treatments end. Your treatment team will talk with you about any side effects you are likely to experience and how to manage them.

Radiation treatment

Radiation treatment is the use of high energy radiation to destroy cancer cells and stop them growing. Radiation treatment only affects the part of the body at which the beam is aimed, so is localised.

This treatment is normally given as small doses, called fractions, over a week to several weeks depending on the type of treatment. This treatment does not make you radioactive.

If your treatment team offers you radiation treatment, they will talk to you about any side effects that you may experience. Common side effects include skin changes and feeling tired.

Hormone treatment

Some types of CUP respond to hormone treatment. Hormone treatment adds, blocks or removes hormones. For women, hormone treatment may be used if the treatment team think the primary cancer site is the breast. For men, it may be used if they think the prostate is the primary cancer site.

Surgery

Surgery is used to help relieve symptoms caused by CUP, such as pain caused by the cancer pressing on organs or nerves. Some people have chemotherapy or radiation treatment after surgery to treat any cancer cells that are left. There are risks and side effects for any type of surgery. Your treatment team will let you know what to expect if you are having surgery.

Clinical trials

For some people, taking part in a clinical trial may be the best treatment choice. Clinical trials are done to see if a new cancer treatment is safe and effective or better than a standard treatment. Your treatment team will let you know if there are any suitable trials available for you to consider.

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Living with CUP

Advanced cancer can cause physical and emotional stress. You may be receiving treatments for the rest of your life. The cancer may go through cycles of growing, shrinking or seem to disappear. It's important to remember that in most cases, advanced cancer may change but it is unlikely to go away completely.

For more information on living well with an advanced cancer diagnosis, read our information on our website at www.cancernz.org.nz.

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More information

[Cancer Society information on chemotherapy](#)

[Cancer Research UK - Cancer of Unknown Primary](#)

[Cancer Council Victoria - Cancer of an Unknown Primary](#)

[Macmillan UK - Cancer of an Unknown Primary](#)