

*If you have any questions, please ask your nurse or physician.*

## Unknown Primary Cancer

Cancer names are based on the primary site, meaning where the cancer started, or originated, in the body. Unknown primary cancer is cancer that is found in more than one site, so the primary site is unclear.

Your physician will order more tests to try to find the primary site. If they find the primary site, your cancer is no longer an unknown primary cancer.

### Causes of unknown primary cancer

Since the primary site is unknown, the causes may be unknown.

### Symptoms

Your signs and symptoms will vary. This depends on the location of the cancer. The list below is not complete, and there may be more symptoms. These symptoms may also be related to something other than the direct cancer.

These are some common symptoms:

- Swollen, firm, non-tender lymph nodes
- Mass in the abdomen that can be felt or a feeling of “fullness”
- Shortness of breath
- Pain in the chest or abdomen
- Bone pain
- Skin tumors
- Low red blood cell counts
- Weakness, fatigue, poor appetite and weight loss

### Diagnosing unknown primary cancer

If your physician thinks you may have an unknown primary cancer, you will need to see a specialist. If the cancer is on your head or neck, a head and neck surgeon will examine you.

To confirm a cancer diagnosis, your surgeon will perform a biopsy. That means the surgeon will remove a small piece of tissue from the tumor to check for cancer. The surgeon can do this in the office if the tumor is easy to access. If the tumor is not easy to access, they will do this under general anesthesia in the operating room.

Another type of biopsy is a fine needle aspiration (FNA). The surgeon does this by removing tissue from neck lymph nodes through a thin needle. They will use an ultrasound to direct the needle precisely into the nodule. They will examine the tissue under a microscope. The surgeon does an FNA in the surgeon's office.

The surgeon may order imaging studies including a CT scan and a PET scan. These can give a clearer picture of the tumor size and location. The scans may also show any spread of disease into the lymph nodes, lungs or bones.

## Resources

[cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/metastatic-squamous-necktreatment-pdq](https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/metastatic-squamous-necktreatment-pdq)

For more information, please contact:

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