

Unknown Primary Cancer

What is unknown primary cancer?

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

Cancer is named based on the primary site, meaning where the cancer started or originated in the body. If cancer is found in more than one site, it may not be clear where it started. This is when it is called unknown primary cancer.

Further tests can be done to try to find which site is the primary site. If the primary site is found, your cancer is no longer an unknown primary cancer.

What causes unknown primary cancer?

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

What are the symptoms?

Signs and symptoms can vary depending on which organs are affected by the cancer. Keep in mind, there may be more symptoms than what is listed below. These symptoms may also be related to something other than the direct cancer.

- 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

How is unknown primary cancer diagnosed?

If your head or neck is affected, an evaluation by a head and neck surgeon is needed to accurately outline the extent of cancer.

A biopsy is a procedure in which a small piece of tissue is removed from the tumor to check for cancer. This can be done in the office if the tumor is easy to access. If not, a procedure under general anesthesia in the operating room may be necessary. Another type of biopsy is a fine needle aspiration (FNA) in which tissue from neck lymph nodes is removed through a thin needle. The tissue is then examined under the microscope. An ultrasound is often used to direct the needle precisely into the nodule. An FNA is done in the surgeon’s office.

Imaging studies including a CT scan and a PET scan may be ordered to obtain a clearer picture of the tumor size and location. The scans will also look for any spread of disease into the lymph nodes, lungs or bones.

Resources:

www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/metastatic-squamous-neck-treatment-pdq

For more information, please contact:

Head and Neck Multidisciplinary Clinic at Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Galter Pavilion, 675 North Saint Clair Street
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Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363 or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

Developed by: NMH Head and Neck Multidisciplinary Clinic