Treating Cancer of Unknown Primary

General treatment information

After your cancer is diagnosed, your cancer care team will discuss your treatment options with you. Choosing a treatment plan is an important decision, so it’s important to take time and think about all of the choices.

In creating your treatment plan, the most important factors to consider are the type of cancer and its location. Your cancer care team will also take into account your general state of health and your personal preferences.

Treatment for cancer of unknown primary (CUP) may include:

- Surgery
- Radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy
- Hormone therapy
- Targeted therapy
- Other drugs

It’s important to discuss all of your treatment options, including their goals and possible side effects, with your doctors to help make the decision that best fits your needs. If time permits, it’s often a good idea to get a second opinion. A second opinion can give you more information and help you feel confident about your chosen treatment plan. See “Treatments for specific instances of cancer of unknown primary” to learn about typical treatments.

Often, CUP is too advanced to be cured, and the goal may be to shrink the cancer for a time, in hopes of improving symptoms and helping you live longer. This treatment is considered palliative or supportive care, because it’s meant to relieve symptoms such as pain, but is not expected to cure the cancer.
Thinking about taking part in a clinical trial

Clinical trials are carefully controlled research studies that are done to get a closer look at promising new treatments or procedures. Clinical trials are one way to get state-of-the-art cancer treatment. In some cases they may be the only way to get access to newer treatments. They are also the best way for doctors to learn better methods to treat cancer. Still, they are not right for everyone.

If you would like to learn more about clinical trials that might be right for you, start by asking your doctor if your clinic or hospital conducts clinical trials. You can also call our clinical trials matching service at 1-800-303-5691 for a list of studies that meet your medical needs, or see “Clinical Trials” to learn more.

Considering complementary and alternative methods

You may hear about alternative or complementary methods that your doctor hasn’t mentioned to treat your cancer or relieve symptoms. These methods can include vitamins, herbs, and special diets, or other methods such as acupuncture or massage, to name a few.

Complementary methods refer to treatments that are used along with your regular medical care. Alternative treatments are used instead of a doctor’s medical treatment. Although some of these methods might be helpful in relieving symptoms or helping you feel better, many have not been proven to work. Some might even be dangerous.

Be sure to talk to your cancer care team about any method you are thinking about using. They can help you learn what is known (or not known) about the method, which can help you make an informed decision. See Complementary and Alternative Medicine to learn more.

Help getting through cancer treatment

Your cancer care team will be your first source of information and support, but there are other resources for help when you need it. Hospital- or clinic-based support services are an important part of your care. These might include nursing or social work services, financial aid, nutritional advice, rehab, or spiritual help.

The American Cancer Society also has programs and services – including rides to treatment, lodging, support groups, and more – to help you get through treatment. Call our National Cancer Information Center at 1-800-227-2345 and speak with one of our
trained specialists on call 24 hours a day, every day.

*The treatment information given here is not official policy of the American Cancer Society and is not intended as medical advice to replace the expertise and judgment of your cancer care team. It is intended to help you and your family make informed decisions, together with your doctor. Your doctor may have reasons for suggesting a treatment plan different from these general treatment options. Don't hesitate to ask him or her questions about your treatment options.*

**Surgery for Cancer of Unknown Primary**

Surgery is a common treatment for many types of cancer if they are found at an early stage. But because cancer of unknown primary (CUP) has already spread beyond the site where it started, surgery is less likely to be helpful.

Surgery may be an option if the cancer is found only in the lymph nodes or in one organ, where the surgeon may be able to remove it all. However, there’s still a chance that the cancer may be elsewhere in the body. If you are considering surgery as a treatment option, it’s important to understand how likely it is to help you.

The type and extent of surgery will depend on where the cancer is and how extensive it is. If surgery is used, it may be followed by radiation therapy and possibly chemotherapy to try to kill any remaining cancer cells in the body.

For more information on surgery, see our document *Understanding Cancer Surgery: A Guide for Patients and Families*.

- **References**
  See all references for Cancer of Unknown Primary

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**Radiation Therapy for Cancer of Unknown Primary**
Radiation therapy uses high-energy rays or particles to destroy cancer cells or slow their rate of growth. The goal of radiation therapy may change based on the situation.

For some cancers that have not spread too far from where they started, it can be used alone or with other treatments such as surgery with the goal of trying to cure the cancer.

If cancer has spread extensively, radiation can be used to relieve symptoms such as pain, bleeding, trouble swallowing, intestinal blockage, compression of blood vessels or nerves by tumors, and problems caused by metastases to bones.

**External beam radiation therapy**

The most common way to deliver radiation to a cancer is to carefully focus a beam of radiation from a machine outside the body. This is known as external beam radiation. To reduce the risk of side effects, doctors carefully figure out the exact dose and aim the beam as accurately as they can to hit the target.

External beam radiation therapy is much like getting a diagnostic x-ray, but the radiation is more intense. The procedure itself is painless. Each treatment lasts only a few minutes, although the setup time – getting you into place for treatment – usually takes longer. The radiation is usually divided into many treatments over several days or weeks.

**Internal radiation therapy (brachytherapy)**

Another method of delivering radiation is called *internal radiation, interstitial radiation, or brachytherapy*. Instead of using radiation beams aimed from a large machine, a radioactive material is placed directly into, or as close as possible to, the cancer. This type of radiation travels a very short distance in the body. The material itself may be left in the body for only a short time, or it may be left there permanently.

Internal radiation therapy lets your doctor give a dose of radiation to a smaller area and in a shorter time than is possible with external radiation treatment.

Sometimes, both internal and external beam radiation therapies are used together.

**Possible side effects of radiation therapy**

Side effects can vary from patient to patient and depend on the radiation dose and the part of your body treated. Some of the possible side effects are listed below:
General side effects

- **Fatigue** (feeling tired)
- Loss of appetite
- Low blood counts
- Skin changes (like a sunburn at the area where the radiation beams enter the body)
- Hair loss (at the site where the beams enter the body)

Side effects from radiation to the head and neck

Radiation therapy to the head and neck area often causes damage to the throat and salivary glands, which can result in:

- Throat pain
- Mouth sores
- Trouble swallowing
- Loss of taste
- Hoarseness
- Dry mouth,

Over the long term it can also lead to cavities in the teeth and thyroid problems (from damage to the thyroid gland). This might mean that you need pills to replace thyroid hormone.

Side effects from radiation to the chest

- Trouble and pain swallowing from irritation of the esophagus (the tube that connects the throat to the esophagus)
- Lung irritation that can lead to cough and shortness of breath

Side effects from radiation to the abdomen

- **Nausea**
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Poor appetite

Side effects from radiation to the pelvis

- Bladder irritation, leading to symptoms like pain or burning with urination and feeling like you have to go often
- Irritation of the rectum and anus, which can lead to diarrhea, bleeding, and pain
- In women, vaginal irritation and discharge.
Most of these side effects go away after treatment ends, but some are long-term and may never go away completely.

If chemotherapy is given along with radiation, the side effects are often worse.

There are ways to relieve many of these side effects, so it's important to discuss any changes you notice with your cancer care team.

For more information on radiation therapy, see the “Radiation Therapy” section of our website, or our document Understanding Radiation Therapy: A Guide for Patients and Families.

- References
  See all references for Cancer of Unknown Primary

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Chemotherapy for Cancer of Unknown Primary

Chemotherapy (chemo) uses anti-cancer drugs that are usually injected into a vein or taken by mouth. These drugs enter the bloodstream and can reach cancer that has spread. Because chemo reaches all parts of the body, it can sometimes be useful for cancers of unknown primary, as it may help kill cancer cells in areas where they haven’t been detected.

Chemo can be used in a number of situations for cancer of unknown primary (CUP). If your doctor recommends chemo, it’s important that you understand what the goals of your treatment are.

Chemo may be the main treatment for cancers that are clearly advanced and are unlikely to be helped by local treatments such as surgery or radiation therapy. In some cases, such as with cancers that are likely to be germ cell tumors or certain types of lymphomas, it may be very effective in making tumors shrink or even go away.
altogether. In other cases, chemo may be used to try to relieve symptoms caused by the cancer and may be able to help people live longer.

For cancers that appear to have been removed completely with local therapies such as surgery or radiation, chemo may be added to try to kill any remaining cancer cells in the body.

Chemo drugs are often given in combinations, which are more likely to be effective than giving a single drug alone. Which chemo drugs are used depends on the type of cancer.

**Adenocarcinoma and poorly differentiated carcinoma**

For a CUP that is an adenocarcinoma or a poorly differentiated carcinoma, a number of chemo combinations may be used, including:

- Carboplatin plus paclitaxel (Taxol®), with or without etoposide (VP-16)
- Carboplatin plus docetaxel (Taxotere®)
- Cisplatin plus gemcitabine (Gemzar®)
- Gemcitabine plus docetaxel
- Oxaliplatin plus 5-fluorouracil and leucovorin (folinic acid)
- Oxaliplatin plus capecitabine (Xeloda)

**Squamous cell cancer (carcinoma)**

If chemotherapy is to be used for a CUP that is a squamous cell cancer, the options include:

- Cisplatin or carboplatin plus a taxane (paclitaxel or docetaxel)
- Cisplatin, docetaxel, and 5-fluorouracil (5-FU)
- Cisplatin plus gemcitabine

**Neuroendocrine cancers (carcinomas)**

Neuroendocrine carcinomas that are poorly differentiated are often treated with the same chemo as is used for small cell cancer of the lung: a platinum drug (cisplatin or carboplatin) and etoposide.

Well-differentiated neuroendocrine cancers are not often the cause of CUP, but may present with liver metastasis and an occult primary. These patients are treated like
patients with well-differentiated carcinoid tumor, with drugs combinations such as:

- Doxorubicin (Adriamycin®) and streptozocin
- Temozolomide plus capecitabine

More information about the treatment of well-differentiated neuroendocrine cancers can be found in our documents Gastrointestinal Carcinoid Tumors, Lung Carcinoid Tumor, and Pancreatic Cancer.

**Possible side effects of chemotherapy**

Chemo drugs work by attacking cells that are dividing quickly, which is why they work against cancer cells. But other cells in the body, like those in the bone marrow, the lining of the mouth and intestines, and the hair follicles, also divide quickly. These cells are also likely to be affected by chemotherapy, which can lead to side effects. Some people have many side effects, while others may have few.

The side effects of chemotherapy depend on the type of drugs, the amount taken, and the length of treatment. Some of the most common possible side effects include:

- Hair loss
- Mouth sores
- Loss of appetite
  - **Nausea and vomiting**
- Low blood cell counts

Chemotherapy often affects the blood-forming cells of the bone marrow, leading to low blood cell counts. This can cause:

- Increased chance of **infections** (low white blood cell counts)
- Easy bruising or bleeding (low blood platelet counts)
  - **Fatigue** (low red blood cell counts or other reasons)

These side effects are usually short-term and go away after treatment is finished. It’s important to let your health care team know if you have any side effects, as there are often ways to lessen them. For example, drugs can be given to help prevent or reduce nausea and vomiting.

Several other side effects are also possible. Some of these are only seen with certain chemo drugs. Your cancer care team will give you information about the possible side effects of the specific drugs you are getting. It’s important to know the specific side effects that can occur with your drugs so you know what to expect and when to call your doctor.
As with other types of treatment, the chance that the benefits of chemo will outweigh the downsides will depend on a number of factors, including the type and extent of the cancer and a person’s general health before treatment. If you are considering chemo, it’s important to talk to your doctor about the chances that it will be helpful versus the likely side effects you will have.

For more information on chemotherapy, see the Chemotherapy section of our website.

- References
  See all references for Cancer of Unknown Primary

Hormone Therapy for Cancer of Unknown Primary

Some types of cancer grow in response to sex hormones in the body. For example, most breast cancers have proteins called estrogen receptors and/or progesterone receptors on the surface of their cells. These cancers grow faster when exposed to the hormone estrogen. Likewise, most prostate cancers grow in response to male hormones called androgens, such as testosterone.

In cases where a cancer of unknown primary (CUP) is likely to be a breast or prostate cancer, hormone therapy may be an effective way to slow the growth of the cancer, or perhaps even shrink it, and may help you live longer.

For breast cancer, types of hormone therapy include drugs like tamoxifen, LHRH agonists like leuprolide (Lupron®) and goserelin (Zoladex®), and the aromatase inhibitors anastrozole (Arimidex®), letrozole (Femara®), and exemestane (Aromasin®). These drugs either lower estrogen levels or prevent cancer cells from being able to use it. For more information on how these drugs are used and their potential side effects, see our document Breast Cancer.

Hormone therapy can also be used to treat prostate cancer. Some commonly used
drugs include LHRH agonists such as leuprolide and goserelin, and anti-androgens such as flutamide (Eulexin®) and bicalutamide (Casodex®). These drugs either lower the testosterone level or prevent cancer cells from being able to use it. Surgery to remove the testicles (orchiectomy) is another option. For more information, see our document *Prostate Cancer*.

- References
  
  See all references for Cancer of Unknown Primary

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**Targeted Therapy for Cancer of Unknown Primary**

Targeted therapy is a newer type of cancer treatment that uses drugs or other substances to identify and attack cancer cells while doing little damage to normal cells. These therapies attack the cancer cells’ inner workings – the programming that makes them different from normal, healthy cells. Each type of targeted therapy works differently, but all alter the way a cancer cell grows, divides, repairs itself, or interacts with other cells.

One target on squamous cell cancers of the head and neck is called *epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR)*. Cells from many of these cancers have too many copies of EGFR, which helps them grow faster and become more resistant to radiation or chemotherapy (chemo). A drug called cetuximab (Erbitux®) blocks EGFR, and can help patients with squamous cell cancers of the head and neck area. It’s often used along with radiation or chemotherapy (chemo), but it can also be used by itself to treat people whose cancers no longer respond to chemo and who can’t take radiation.

A number of targeted therapy drugs are used to treat breast cancer, including trastuzumab (Herceptin®), pertuzumab (Perjeta®), lapatinib (Tykerb®), and everolimus (Afinitor®). For more information, see the section *Targeted Therapy for Breast Cancer* in our *Breast Cancer* document.
Other targeted therapy drugs are used for cancers that start in other areas, and may be helpful in some cases of cancer of unknown primary. For example, sunitinib (Sutent®) and everolimus (Afinitor®) are helpful in treating pancreatic neuroendocrine cancer, and may be used to treat well differentiated neuroendocrine cancers of unknown primary.

- References

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Other Drugs for Cancer of Unknown Primary

Bisphosphonates

Bisphosphonates are drugs that are used to help strengthen and reduce the risk of fractures in bones that have been weakened by metastatic cancer. Examples include pamidronate (Aredia®) and zoledronic acid (Zometa®). They are given intravenously (IV). To treat cancer that has spread to bone, they are given once a month.

Bisphosphonates can have side effects, including flu-like symptoms and bone pain. They can also cause kidney problems, so people with kidney problems can’t use them. A rare but very distressing side effect of intravenous bisphosphonates is damage (osteonecrosis) in the jaw bones (ONJ). It can be triggered by having a tooth extraction (removal) while getting treated with the bisphosphonate. ONJ often appears as an open sore in the jaw that won’t heal. It can lead to loss of teeth or infections of the jaw bone. Doctors don’t know why this happens or how to treat it, other than to stop the bisphosphonates. Maintaining good oral hygiene by flossing, brushing, making sure that dentures fit properly, and having regular dental check-ups may help prevent this. Most doctors recommend that patients have a dental check-up and have any tooth or jaw problems treated before they start taking a bisphosphonate.

Denosumab
Like bisphosphonates, denosumab (Prolia®, Xgeva®) is a drug that can be used to strengthen bones and lower the risk of fractures in bones weakened by cancer spread. To treat cancer that has spread to bone, this drug is given as an injection under the skin, once a month.

Side effects include low levels of calcium and phosphate and ONJ. This drug does not cause kidney damage, so it is safe to give to people with kidney problems.

**Octreotide**

Octreotide (Sandostatin®) is an agent chemically related to a natural hormone, somatostatin. It’s very helpful for some patients with neuroendocrine tumors. If the tumor releases hormones into the bloodstream (which is rare in the poorly differentiated tumors that cause cancer of unknown primary), this drug can stop the hormone release. It can also cause tumors to stop growing or (rarely) to shrink. This drug is available as a short-acting version given as injection 2 to 4 times a day. It’s also available as a long-acting injection that needs to be given only once a month. A similar drug, lanreotide (Somatuline®), is also available. It’s also given as an injection once a month. These drugs are most likely to help treat cancers that show up on somatostatin receptor scintigraphy (OctreoScan).

- [References](#)
  - See all references for Cancer of Unknown Primary

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**Treatment of Specific Instances of a Cancer of Unknown Primary**

The types of treatment used for a cancer of unknown primary depend on several factors, including the size and location of the cancer, the results of lab tests, and how likely it is to be a certain type of cancer. Your overall health and ability to tolerate treatment matter also. Of course, if the origin of the cancer can be determined during testing, the cancer would no longer be an unknown primary and would be treated...
according to where it started.

**Squamous cell carcinoma in lymph nodes in the neck**

Often these cancers began somewhere in the mouth, throat, or larynx. They are often treated with surgery and/or radiation therapy.

Surgical treatment removes lymph nodes and other tissue from the neck. This operation is called a *neck dissection*. There are several types that differ in the amount of tissue removed from the neck:

- A *partial* or *selective* neck dissection removes only a few lymph nodes.
- A *modified radical* neck dissection removes most lymph nodes on one side of the neck between the jawbone and collarbone, as well as some muscle and nerve tissue.
- A *radical* neck dissection removes nearly all the nodes on one side, as well as even more muscles, nerves, and veins.

The most common side effects of any neck dissection are numbness of the ear, weakness in raising the arm above the head, and weakness of the lower lip. These side effects are caused by injury during the operation to the nerves that supply these areas. After a selective neck dissection, the weakness of the arm and lower lip usually go away after a few months. But if a nerve is removed as part of surgery, the weakness will be permanent. After any neck dissection, physical therapists can show the patient exercises to improve neck and shoulder movement.

Radiation therapy might be used instead of surgery. One potential advantage is that the area treated would include both the nodes with metastatic cancer and several of the areas of the neck likely to contain a primary tumor.

Some patients are treated with both surgery and radiation therapy. This is considered when large and/or many tumors are present. The radiation may be given before or after surgery.

When tumors are very large or present on both sides of the neck, chemotherapy (chemo) and radiation therapy are often used together. Cisplatin and 5-FU with a taxane [docetaxel (Taxotere) or paclitaxel (Taxol)] are the usual chemotherapy drugs used. Cetuximab (Erbitux) may also be used with radiation (instead of chemo).

The outlook for these patients depends on the size, number, and location of the lymph nodes containing metastatic cancer. For more information about the usual treatments for these cancers see our documents *Nasal Cavity and Paranasal Sinus Cancers, Oral*
Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancer and Laryngeal and Hypopharyngeal Cancer.

**Adenocarcinoma in lymph nodes under the arm**

Because most cancers that have spread to the axillary nodes (lymph nodes under the arm) in women are breast cancers, the recommended treatment is similar to that for women diagnosed with breast cancer that has spread to these nodes.

Surgery to remove axillary nodes (called an *axillary lymph node dissection*) is done, and the breast on the same side may be treated with mastectomy (surgery to remove the breast) or radiation therapy.

Depending on the woman's age and whether the cancer cells contain estrogen and/or progesterone receptors, additional (adjuvant) treatment may include hormonal therapy (with tamoxifen or an aromatase inhibitor), chemo, or both. The cancer can also be tested for a protein called HER2. If positive, a drug that targets the HER2 protein such as trastuzumab (Herceptin) may be used. For more information about prognosis and treatment of breast cancer that has spread to the lymph nodes, see our document Breast Cancer.

Although cancer in axillary lymph nodes in men may represent spread from a breast cancer, spread from a lung cancer is much more likely. An axillary lymph node dissection and/or radiation therapy to the underarm area may be considered in some cases, but many doctors would recommend chemo first and waiting to see how the enlarged lymph nodes respond. The combination of drugs would probably be the same as that given for adenocarcinomas or poorly differentiated carcinomas found in other parts of the body.

**Cancer in groin lymph nodes**

It’s important to search carefully for the origin of these cancers, as many of them can be treated effectively if it is found. If the primary tumor can’t be found, surgery is usually the main treatment.

If the cancer appears to be confined to a single lymph node, removing it may be the only treatment. In other cases, more extensive surgery (a lymph node dissection) may be needed. If more than one lymph node is found to contain cancer, radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy may be recommended as well.

**Women with cancer throughout the pelvic cavity**
Unless tests have found a primary cancer outside the ovaries (in which case the diagnosis of cancer of unknown primary would no longer apply), these cancers are most likely to be spread from either ovarian cancer, fallopian tube cancer, or primary peritoneal carcinoma (PPC). Fallopian tube cancer and PPC are diseases similar to ovarian cancer and they are all treated the same way.

Treatment is typically surgery to remove the uterus, both ovaries, both fallopian tubes, and as much of the cancer as possible. After surgery, 6 to 8 months of chemo is recommended, usually with a taxane (paclitaxel or docetaxel) and platinum drug (cisplatin or carboplatin). For more information, see our document Ovarian Cancer.

**Cancer in the retroperitoneum (back of the abdomen) or mediastinum (middle of the chest)**

If lab tests of the tumor sample have ruled out lymphoma, the most likely diagnosis (particularly in younger men) is a germ cell tumor. Even cancers in these areas that do not have lab results typical of germ cell tumors often respond to chemotherapy combinations for treating testicular germ cell tumors. Chemo drugs used include cisplatin and etoposide, sometimes with bleomycin or ifosfamide. More information about the treatment of germ cell tumors can be found in our documents Testicular Cancer and Ovarian Cancer.

If a carcinoma is in the mediastinum in an older patient it may be treated as a non-small cell lung cancer.

**Melanoma in lymph nodes only**

Once a cancer of unknown primary (CUP) has been diagnosed as a melanoma, it’s no longer a true CUP. This situation is mentioned, nonetheless, because some tests to identify melanomas may take several days. Until they are complete, these patients are considered to have CUP.

The recommended initial treatment of melanoma of unknown primary with only lymph node spread is surgery to remove the lymph nodes in the affected area. If spread to other nodes becomes apparent at a later time and all of the cancer can be removed, these nodes are also removed. For more information see our document Melanoma Skin Cancer.

**Cancer in other locations such as bone or liver**
This group represents the majority of people with CUP. Usually the cancer is in the bones, lung, or liver. Once lab testing of the biopsy specimen has excluded cancers of the breast, prostate, thyroid, and lymphoma (all of which often respond well to specific treatments), many of the remaining patients are treated with chemo to try to shrink the tumor and reduce symptoms.

Most doctors use a standard chemotherapy regimen. It consists of either cisplatin or carboplatin, combined with a taxane drug such as paclitaxel or docetaxel. Other drugs like gemcitabine may be used as well. It’s important to stop chemo if it’s not working to relieve symptoms or shrink the cancer, as the side effects of these drugs can be severe and impair quality of life.

Sometimes chemo can be quite helpful. About 15% of patients treated with aggressive chemo will have a complete response (with no visible cancer left after treatment), and in some of these the cancer stays away for years.

Patients in poor health who would not be able to tolerate the side effects of aggressive chemo are sometimes treated with lower doses or with drugs that cause fewer side effects. But the benefit of this approach is not clearly proven. Another option is to focus on relieving symptoms as they occur. Many patients with cancer spread to bones benefit from treatment with bisphosphonates (discussed in the section Other Drugs for Cancer of Unknown Primary). These drugs can help strengthen bones weakened by cancer, preventing fractures (breaks), and reducing pain.

Some poorly differentiated small cell cancers of unknown origin can shrink dramatically using chemo combinations originally developed to treat small cell lung cancer. The benefit usually lasts for several months, but these cancers almost always return.

Some neuroendocrine cancers may respond to treatment with octreotide (Sandostatin) or lanreotide (Somatuline). These drugs may be able to slow or stop growth for some time. The tumors most likely to respond are the ones able to be seen on somatostatin receptor scintigraphy (imaging). Some other drugs known as targeted therapy that are helpful in treating pancreatic neuroendocrine cancers may be used as well. More information about these can be found in the section Chemotherapy for Pancreatic Cancer in our document Pancreatic Cancer.

More information about treatments for cancers that have spread can be found in our document Advanced Cancer.

- References
See all references for Cancer of Unknown Primary
Palliative Care for Cancer of Unknown Primary

Some cancers of unknown primary can be treated effectively or even cured, but most are advanced cancers for which treatments are unlikely to provide long-term benefits. It’s very important that people with advanced cancer of unknown primary (CUP) are aware that even if the cancer can’t be cured, there are treatments available to help prevent or relieve pain and other symptoms. More information about these can be found in our document Advanced Cancer.

Pain is a significant concern for patients with cancer of unknown primary. There are proven ways to relieve pain due to cancer of unknown primary using a combination of medicines and, in some cases, surgical procedures. Patients should not hesitate to take advantage of these treatments, which means they must tell their doctors if they have pain. Otherwise the doctor can’t help. For most patients, treatment with morphine or drugs related to it (called opioids because they are related to opium) can reduce pain considerably while still allowing them to function well. For the treatment to be effective, the pain medicines must be given regularly on a schedule, not just when the pain becomes severe. Several long-acting forms of morphine and other long-acting opioid drugs have been developed that need only be given once or twice a day.

For more information on pain, what can be done about it, and how to keep track of it, see the “Cancer-related Pain” section of our website.

- References

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