

Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)



Fact Sheet on Tumour Markers

Introduction

A tumour marker is any cellular, molecular, chemical or physical change that can be measured and used to study a normal or abnormal process in the body which can be found in the blood, urine, or body tissues and can be elevated in cancer. There are many different tumour markers, each indicative of a particular disease process, and they are used in oncology to help detect the presence of cancer.



[Picture Credit: Tumour Marker Test]

An elevated level of a tumour marker is usually indicative of the presence of cancer, however, there can also be other causes of the particular elevation.

Tumour markers are assuming a growing role in all aspects of cancer care, starting from screening to follow-up after treatment, and their judicious application in clinical practice needs a thorough understanding of the basics of pathophysiology, techniques of identification or testing, reasons for out-of-range levels of tumour markers, as well as the knowledge of evidence of their role in any given malignancy. Tumour markers are, at the most, just an adjunct to diagnosis, and establishing a diagnosis on the basis of tumour markers alone (especially a single result) is fraught with associated pitfalls because of the problem of non-specificity. In reality an ideal tumour marker does not exist.

Some tumour markers are specific to one type of cancer, while others are related to several different types of cancer. Tumour markers may also become elevated as a result of the presence of non-cancerous conditions. Tumour markers can be produced directly by the tumour or by non-tumour cells as a response to the presence of a tumour. Most tumour markers are tumour antigens, but not all tumour antigens can be used as tumour markers.

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Page 1

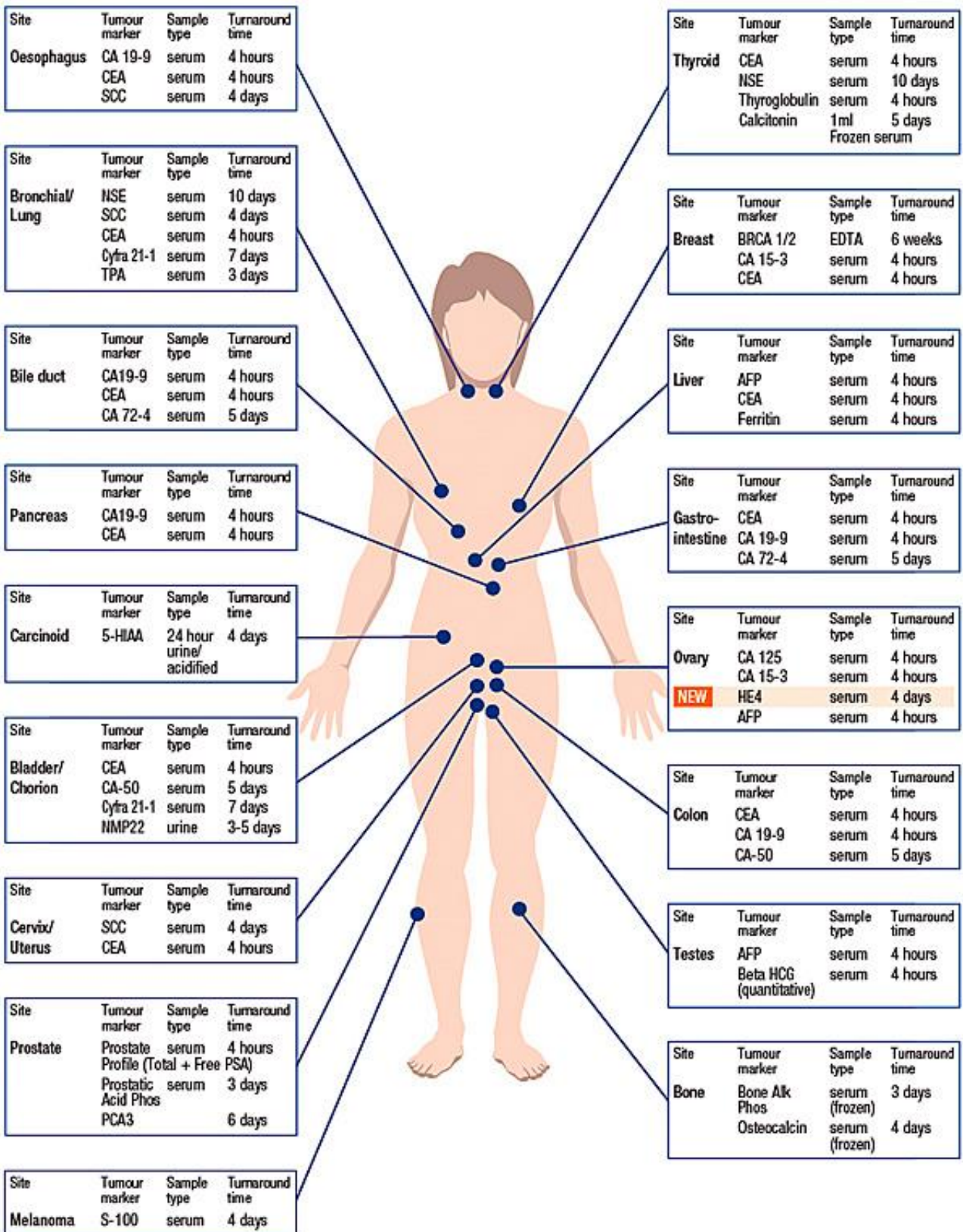
Limitations of Tumour Markers

Tumour markers are not fool proof. Other tests are usually needed to learn more about a possible cancer or recurrence.

Some of the limitations of tumour markers are listed below:

- A condition or disease, other than cancer, can elevate tumour marker levels
- Some tumour marker levels may be high in people without cancer
- Tumour marker levels may vary over time, making it hard to get consistent results
- The level of a tumour marker may not rise until a person's cancer worsens. This is not helpful for early detection, screening, or watching for recurrence
- Some cancers do not make tumour markers that are found in the blood. This includes cancers with no known tumour markers. Also, some patients do not have higher tumour marker levels even if the type of cancer they have usually makes tumour markers

Tumour Markers at a Glance



(The Doctors Laboratory).

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Tumour Markers in General Use

Tumour markers alone are not diagnostic for cancer; for some types of cancer, they provide additional information that can be considered in conjunction with a patient's medical history and physical examination as well as other laboratory and/or imaging tests.

Tumour markers that are generally used in oncology are dealt with in this Fact Sheet. They are listed in no particular order.

This Fact Sheet may not contain a comprehensive list of all tumour markers, however, the most used tumour markers are included.

Tumour Marker CA 19-9

Ca 19-9 is not sensitive or specific enough to use as a screening test for cancer, and it is not diagnostic of a specific type of cancer. Its main use is as a tumour marker:

- To help differentiate between cancer of the pancreas and other conditions, such as pancreatitis
- To monitor a person's response to pancreatic cancer treatment and/or cancer progression
- To watch for pancreatic cancer recurrence

Tumour Marker CEA

Carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) is a protein found in many types of cells but associated with tumours and the developing foetus. It is used for staging of applicable cancers, to determine prognosis, and to monitor success of treatment and detect recurrence.

Tumour Marker BR-ABL

This tumour marker is associated with the following cancers:

- Chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML)
- BCR-ABL-positive acute lymphocytic leukaemia (ALL)

Tumour Marker SCC-Ag

Elevated expression of SCC-Ag has been used as a biomarker for aggressive squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) in cancers of the:

- Cervix
- Lung
- Head and Neck
- Liver

Tumour Marker NSE

The NSE (neuroenzyme-specific-enolase) is an enzyme only found in nervous tissue or in neuroendocrine tissue. At present, it is used in small cell lung cancer.

NSE: Neuron-specific enolase (NSE) is a substance that has also been detected in patients with certain tumours, namely:

- Neuroblastoma
- small cell lung cancer
- medullary thyroid cancer
- carcinoid tumours
- endocrine tumours of the pancreas
- melanoma.

Tumour Marker Cyfra 21-1

It is used in lung cancer, diagnosis. Cyfra can also be used in uterine cancer, oesophageal cancer, and bladder cancer.

Tumour Marker TPA

Tissue polypeptide antigen (TPA) is a differentiation and proliferation marker of non-squamous epithelium and derived neoplasms. TPA is a tumour marker in gastric and colorectal carcinoma.

Tumour Marker CA 72-4

CA 72-4 is of particular interest, not only for its capabilities in diagnosing and monitoring certain neoplastic diseases, but also for its excellent specificity. Several studies focused on the potential clinical usefulness of CA 72-4 in gastrointestinal (GI) cancer, gynaecological cancer, colorectal and ovarian cancer.

Tumour Marker 5-HAA

Also known as: HIAA; Serotonin Metabolite.

Formal name: 5-hydroxyindoleacetic Acid.

Related tests: Serotonin; Chromogranin A.

The 5-hydroxyindoleacetic acid (5-HIAA) urine test is used to help diagnose and monitor carcinoid tumours.

Tumour Marker CA-50

CA-50 is not organ-specific and its elevated levels in serum can be observed in a variety of malignancies, especially gastrointestinal cancers.

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Moderately high serum levels of CA 50 can also be seen in benign hepatobiliary diseases, especially in jaundice cases.

Tumour Marker Chromogranin A (CgA)

This tumour marker is associated with Neuroendocrine tumours (carcinoid tumours, neuroblastoma). It is one of the most sensitive tumour markers for carcinoid tumours.

Tumour Marker PSA

Tumour marker Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) is a good marker, very well known, because of its high specificity: found in normal prostatic epithelioma and secretions, but not in other tissues. PSA is normally present, in low concentrations, in every male adult's blood. Produced by normal and abnormal cells of the prostate, it is highly sensitive to the presence of prostate cancer: its increasing is correlated to the tumour grade and its volume.

Prostate Serum Profile (Total + Free PSA)

Free PSA is a newer evaluation for prostate health. Most PSA in the blood is bound to serum proteins, but a small amount is not protein-bound and is called free PSA. In men with prostate cancer, the ratio of free (unbound) PSA to total PSA is decreased.

Prostatic Serum Acid Phos (PCA3)

PCA3 is a molecular diagnostic test performed on urine rather than blood and detects mRNA that is excreted into the urethra via the epithelial cells that line the prostatic ducts. Prostate cancer cells tend to produce this compound far more than normal cells do.

Tumour Marker S-100

S-100 protein continues to be an extremely useful marker especially for soft tissue and peripheral nervous system tumours.

Tumour Marker Thyroglobulin

The measurement of the protein Thyroglobulin (abbreviated Tg) in blood, is an important laboratory test for checking whether a patient still has some thyroid tissue present.

Tumour Marker AFP

Tumour marker AFP - the developing foetus normally produces the alpha-foetoprotein. Its level decreases fast after birth, and normally is not detectable in safe adult's blood (except during

pregnancy). Elevated results of the AFP strongly suggest the presence of primitive liver cancer, or a germinal ovarian or testicular cancer. The AFP's interest lies in cancers of the liver, then ovary and testicle.

Calcitonin Tumour Marker

Also known as: Human Calcitonin; Thyrocalcitonin

Formal name: Calcitonin

The calcitonin test is primarily used to help diagnose C-cell hyperplasia and medullary thyroid cancer, to evaluate the effectiveness of treatment, and to monitor those affected for recurrence. It is also ordered to screen for medullary thyroid cancer in family members of people with multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2 (MEN 2).

Tumour Marker DCP

Its full name is Des-gamma-carboxy prothrombin. It is associated with hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).

ALK Gene Rearrangements

Transforming rearrangements of the ALK (anaplastic lymphoma kinase) gene have recently been described in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC).

BRCA 1 / 2 Tumour Marker

Also known as: BRCA; Breast Cancer Susceptibility Genes 1 and 2. Formal name: Breast Cancer Gene 1 and Breast Cancer Gene 2. Standard *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* tests are used to detect mutations that are known to increase the risk of breast and ovarian cancer development. If a *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* mutation has been identified in a family member with breast and/or ovarian cancer, then that specific mutation can be tested in other family members to assess their risk.

Tumour Marker CA 15-3

Its full name is Cancer Antigen 15-3 or Carbohydrate Antigen 15-3. CA 15-3 is not sensitive or specific enough to be considered useful as a tool for cancer screening. Its main use is to monitor a person's response to breast cancer treatment and to help watch for breast cancer recurrence. CA 15-3 is sometimes ordered to give a doctor a general sense of how much cancer may be present (the tumour burden). CA 15-3 can only be used as a marker if the cancer is producing elevated amounts of it, so this test will not be useful for all people with breast cancer.

This tumour marker is raised in:

- Breast Cancer (often not elevated in the early stages of breast cancer)
- Lung cancer
- Ovarian cancer

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- Endometrial cancer
- Bladder cancer
- Gastrointestinal cancer

Tumour Marker 72-4

Tumour marker CA 72-4 - diagnosing gastric carcinoma is often complicated and can be extremely difficult due to presentation with vague, non-specific symptoms that are sometimes associated with non-malignant disease. It is used together with tumour markers CEA and CA 19-9. (CancerSafe)

Tumour Marker CA 125

Tumour marker CA 125 is a marker for ovarian cancer : the CA 125 is the essential marker for this cancer. It's THE marker in serous adenocarcinomas.

Tumour Marker B2M (Beta-2 microglobulin)

Serum and plasma beta₂ microglobulin values have emerged as markers for the activation of the cellular immune system, as well as a tumour marker in certain haematologic malignancies. Urine beta₂ microglobulin values indicate renal filtration disorders.

Beta-2 microglobulin tumour marker is used to determine the prognosis and to monitor the success of treatment and to detect recurrence in:

- Multiple myeloma
- Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL)
- Some lymphomas

Tumour Marker hCG

Its full name is Human chorionic gonadotropin, also called Beta-hCG. It is associated with:

- Testicular cancer
- Trophoblastic disease
- Germ cell tumours
- Choriocarcinoma

Tumour Marker JAK2 Mutation

It is associated with certain types of leukaemia. It is used to help diagnose leukaemias. It is also used to diagnose bone marrow disorders characterised by overproduction of one or more types of blood cells known as myelo-proliferative neoplasms (MPNs), especially Polycythaemia Vera (PV).

KRAS Mutation Tumour Marker

It is associated with the following cancers:

- Colorectal cancer
- Non-small cell lung cancer

Tumour Marker Lactate Dehydrogenase (LDH)

A lactate dehydrogenase (LD or LDH) test is a non-specific test that may be used in the evaluation of a number of diseases and conditions. LD is an enzyme that is found in almost all of the body's cells (as well as in bacteria) and is released from cells into the fluid portion of blood (serum or plasma) when cells are damaged or destroyed. Thus, the blood level of LD is a general indicator of tissue and cellular damage. The level of LD may also rise in other types of body fluids (e.g. cerebrospinal fluid, pleural fluid, etc.) in the presence of certain diseases.

An LD *blood* test may be used to help stage, determine prognosis, and/or monitor treatment (i.e., chemotherapy) of cancers, such as germ cell tumours (e.g., some types of testicular cancer and ovarian cancer), lymphoma, leukaemia, melanoma, and neuroblastoma

Tumour Marker SMRP

Its full name is Soluble Mesothelin-related Peptides. It is associated with mesothelioma (a rare type of cancer associated with asbestos exposure).

T-cell Receptor Gene Rearrangement

This tumour marker is associated with T-cell lymphoma. It is used to detect characteristic changes (rearrangements) in specific T-cells.

Tumour Marker HE 4

Human epididymis protein 4 (HE4) belongs to the family of whey acidic four-disulfide core proteins. HE4 has been shown to be overexpressed in 93% of serous, 100% of endometrioid, and 50% of clear cell ovarian carcinomas.

Beta HCG (Quantitative) Tumour Marker

Tumour marker BHCG is normally produced by placenta during pregnancy. It is used as pregnancy test, since its level grows fast in first three months. Apart from this field, BHCG is used for testicular cancer, where high levels can be observed; less commonly, ovary, liver, and last, stomach, pancreas and lung.

Marijuana consumption leads to increased levels.

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Osteocalcin Tumour Marker

Serum osteocalcin (OC) is derived largely from new cellular synthesis. It is a marker for bone formation and a non-invasive specific marker of osteoblastic activity. The clinical significance of OC is in monitoring prostatic cancer bone metastases.

Some Pathologies and Their Respective Tumour Markers

Breast	CA15-3, CEA, Cyfra 21-1.
Ovary	CEA, CA125, CA 19-9; AFP, BHCG.
Uterine	SCC, Cyfra 21-1 ; CEA, CA 19-9, CA 125.
Prostate	PSA, FPSA and ratio.
Testicle	BHCG, AFP.
Colorectal	CEA, CA 19-9, CA 125.
Pancreas	CEA, CA 19-9, CA 72-4.
Liver	AFP, CEA.
Stomach	CA 72-4, CEA, CA 19-9.
Oesophagus	CEA, Cyfra 21-1.
Thyroid	CEA, NSE.
Lung	NSE, CYFRA 21-1; CEA, CA 125, CA 19-9.
Bladder	TPA, CEA, Cyfra 21-1.

Values of Some Tumour Markers

Range – moderate to high values:

CEA	ng/ml <5 5-10 10->100 000
AFP	ng/ml <15 15-200 200-10 000
PSA	ng/ml <4 4-10 10-1 000
FPSA/PSA	ratio : >0.25 . <0.25 <0.10
CA 15-3	U/ml <40 40-60 60-30 000
CA 19-9	U/ml <35 35-100 100-5 000 000
CA 125	U/ml <35 35-50 50- 50 000
CA 72-4	U/ml <6.7 7-30 30-10 000
BHCG	UI/ml <5 >5 5-500 000
B2M	mg/l <2 >2 2-10
NSE	ng/ml <21 22-40 40-10 000
CYFRA 21	ng/ml <3,5 >3,5 3,5-1000.

Multiple Tumour Marker Tests

Tumour markers are not, by and large, useful diagnostic tests, but more often useful to find the origin of confirmed carcinoma of unknown primary (CUP) or to track the evolution of a confirmed tumour.

Multiple Tumour marker tests will give a more exact result; these are:

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- Colorectal: M2-PK, if M2-PK is not available, so can test CEA, CA 19-9, CA 125
- Breast: CEA, CA 15-3, Cyfra 21-1
- Ovary: CEA, CA 19-9, CA 125, AFP, BHCG
- Uterine: CEA, CA 19-9, CA 125, Cyfra 21-1, SCC
- Prostate: PSA, FPSA and ratio
- Testicle: AFP, BHCG
- Pancreas/Stomach: CEA, CA 19-9, CA 72-4
- Liver: CEA, AFP
- Oesophagus: CEA, Cyfra 21-1
- Thyroid: CEA, NSE
- Lung: CEA, CA 19-9, CA 125, NSE, Cyfra 21-1 (Sensitivity at 95 percent percentile for Cyfra 21-1 is 79 percent, while for SCC and CEA are 41 and 31 percent respectively)
- Bladder: CEA, Cyfra 21-1, TPA

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