Fever of unknown origin (FUO) in adults is defined as a temperature higher than 38.3°C (100.9°F) that lasts for more than three weeks with no obvious source despite appropriate investigation. The four categories of potential etiology of FUO are classic, nosocomial, immune deficient, and human immunodeficiency virus-related. The four subgroups of the differential diagnosis of FUO are infections, malignancies, autoimmune conditions, and miscellaneous. A thorough history, physical examination, and standard laboratory testing remain the basis of the initial evaluation of the patient with FUO. Newer diagnostic modalities, including updated serology, viral cultures, computed tomography, and magnetic resonance imaging, have important roles in the assessment of these patients. (Am Fam Physician 2003;68:2223-8. Copyright© 2003 American Academy of Family Physicians.)

Adult patients frequently present to the physician’s office with a fever (temperature higher than 38.3°C [100.9°F]). Most febrile conditions are readily diagnosed on the basis of presenting symptoms and a problem-focused physical examination. Occasionally, simple testing such as a complete blood count or urine culture is required to make a definitive diagnosis. Viral illnesses (e.g., upper respiratory infections) account for most of these self-limiting cases and usually resolve within two weeks. When fever persists, a more extensive diagnostic investigation should be conducted. Although some persistent fevers are manifestations of serious illnesses, most can be readily diagnosed and treated.

Definitions and Classifications

The definition of fever of unknown origin (FUO), as based on a case series of 100 patients, calls for a temperature higher than 38.3°C on several occasions; a fever lasting more than three weeks; and a failure to reach a diagnosis despite one week of inpatient investigation. This strict definition prevents common and self-limiting medical conditions from being included as FUO. Some experts have argued for a more comprehensive definition of FUO that takes into account medical advances and changes in disease states, such as the emergence of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection and an increasing number of patients with neutropenia. Others contend that altering the definition would not benefit the evaluation and care of patients with FUO.

The four categories of potential etiology of FUO are centered on patient subtype—classic, nosocomial, immune deficient, and HIV-associated. Each group has a unique differential diagnosis, which is based on characteristics and vulnerabilities and, therefore, a different process of evaluation (Table 1).

CLASSIC

The classic category includes patients who meet the original criteria of FUO, with a new emphasis on the ambulatory evaluation of these previously healthy patients. The revised criteria require an evaluation of at least three days in the hospital, three outpatient visits, or one week of logical and intensive outpatient testing without clarification of the fever’s cause. The most common causes of classic FUO are infection, malignancy, and collagen vascular disease.

NOSOCOMIAL

Nosocomial FUO is defined as fever occurring on several occasions in a patient who has been hospitalized for at least 24 hours and has
not manifested an obvious source of infection that could have been present before admission. A minimum of three days of evaluation without establishing the cause of fever is required to make this diagnosis. Conditions causing nosocomial FUO include septic thrombophlebitis, pulmonary embolism, drug-induced fever. In patients with nasogastric or nasotracheal tubes, sinusitis also may be a cause.

**IMMUNE DEFICIENT**

Immune-deficient FUO, also known as neutropenic FUO, is defined as recurrent fever in a patient whose neutrophil count is 500 per mm$^3$ or less and who has been assessed for three days without establishing an etiology for the fever. In most of these cases, the fever is caused by opportunistic bacterial infections. These patients are usually treated with broad-spectrum antibiotics to cover the most likely pathogens. Occult infections caused by fungi, such as hepatosplenic candidiasis and aspergillosis, must be considered. Less commonly, herpes simplex virus may be the inciting organism, but this infection tends to present with characteristic skin findings.

**HIV-ASSOCIATED**

HIV-associated FUO is defined as recurrent fevers over a four-week period in an outpatient or for three days in a hospitalized patient with HIV infection. Although acute HIV infection remains an important cause of classic FUO, the virus also makes patients susceptible to opportunistic infections. The differential diagnosis of FUO in patients who are HIV positive includes infectious etiologies such as *Mycobacterium avium-intracellulare* complex, *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, and cytomegalovirus. Geographic considerations are especially important in determining the etiology of FUO in patients with HIV. For example, a patient with HIV who lives in the southwest United States is more susceptible to coccidioidomycosis. In patients with HIV infection, non-infectious causes of FUO are less common and include lymphomas, Kaposi’s sarcoma, and drug-induced fever.

### Differential Diagnosis

The differential diagnosis of FUO generally is broken into four major subgroups: infections, malignancies, autoimmune conditions, and miscellaneous (Table 2). Sev-
eral factors may limit the applicability of research literature on FUO to everyday medical practice. These factors include the geographic location of cases, the type of institution reporting results (e.g., community hospital, university hospital, ambulatory clinic), and the specific subpopulations of patients with FUO who were studied. Despite these limiting factors, infection remains the most common cause of FUO in study reports.3,11,12

INFECTIONS

Of the many infectious diseases that are associated with FUO, tuberculosis (especially extrapulmonary) and abdominal or pelvic abscesses are the most common.13 Intra-abdominal abscesses are associated with perforated hollow viscera (as occurs in appendicitis), diverticulitis, malignancy, and trauma. Other common infections that should be considered as the source of FUO include subacute bacterial endocarditis, sinusitis, osteomyelitis, and dental abscess.11,13 As the duration of fever increases, the likelihood of an infectious etiology decreases. Malignancy and factitious fever are more common diagnostic considerations in patients with prolonged FUO.14

MALIGNANCIES

Because of a substantial increase in the elderly population, malignancy has become a common etiologic consideration in elderly patients. Malignancies that sometimes are difficult to diagnose, such as chronic leukemias, lymphomas, renal cell carcinomas, and metastatic cancers, often are found in patients with FUO.12

AUTOIMMUNE CONDITIONS

Rheumatoid arthritis and rheumatic fever are inflammatory diseases that used to be commonly associated with FUO, but with advances in serologic testing, these conditions usually are diagnosed more promptly. At this time, adult Still’s disease and temporal arteritis have become the most common autoimmune sources of FUO because they remain difficult to diagnose even with the help of laboratory testing.

Multisystem inflammatory diseases such as temporal arteritis and polymyalgia rheumatica have emerged as the autoimmune conditions most frequently associated with FUO in patients older than 65 years.15 Elderly patients who present with symptoms consistent with temporal arteritis associated with an elevation of the erythrocyte sedimentation rate should be referred for temporal artery biopsy.16

MISCELLANEOUS

Many unrelated pathologic conditions can present as FUO, with drug-induced fever being the most common.11,14 This condition is part of a hypersensitivity reaction to specific drugs such as diuretics, pain medications, antiarrhythmic agents, antiseizure drugs, sedatives, certain antibiotics, antihistamines, barbiturates, cephalosporins, salicylates, and sulfonamides (Table 3).

Complications from cirrhosis and hepatitis (alcoholic, granulomatous, or lupoid) are also potential causes of FUO.12,13 Deep venous thrombosis, although a rare cause of FUO, must be considered in relevant patients, and venous Doppler studies should be obtained.17 Factitious fever has been associated with patients who have some medical training or experience and a fever persisting longer than six months.18 Failure to reach a definitive diagnosis in patients presenting with FUO is not uncommon; 20 percent of cases remain undiagnosed. Even if an extensive investigation does not identify a cause for FUO, these patients generally have a favorable outcome.19

Evaluation of the Patient with FUO

The initial approach to the patient presenting with fever should include a comprehensive history, physical examina-
TABLE 3  
**Agents Commonly Associated with Drug-Induced Fever**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug Name</th>
<th>Drug Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allopurinol (Zyloprim)</td>
<td>Meperidine (Demerol)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captopril (Capoten)</td>
<td>Methyltdopa (Aldomet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cimetidine (Tagamet)</td>
<td>Nifedipine (Procardia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clofibrate (Atromid-S)</td>
<td>Nitrofurantoin (Furadantin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erythromycin</td>
<td>Penicillin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heparin</td>
<td>Phenytoin (Dilantin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydralazine (Apresoline)</td>
<td>Procainamide (Pronestyl)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydrochlorothiazide (Esidrix)</td>
<td>Quinidine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isoniazid</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

...
Diagnosis of Fever of Unknown Origin

Complete history and physical assessment

Positive findings → Yes → Order appropriate and specific diagnostic testing.

Infection

Urine and sputum cultures for AFB, VDRL, HIV test; serology for CMV, EBV, ASO titer (geographically specific testing)

Diagnosis clear?

Hematologic

Peripheral smear, serum protein electrophoresis

Diagnosis clear?

Nonhematologic

Mammography, chest CT with contrast, upper/lower endoscopy, bone scan, gallium 67 scan

Diagnosis clear?

Autoimmune conditions

Rheumatoid factor, ANA

Diagnosis clear?

Miscellaneous

Order appropriate diagnostic tests based on information from the history.

Malignancies

CBC, electrolytes, LFT, blood culture, urinalysis, urine culture, ESR, PPD skin test, chest radiograph

Positive results → Yes → Order appropriate follow-up diagnostic testing.

CT of abdomen/pelvis with contrast

Assign to most likely category.

Infection

No

TTE/TEE, lumbar puncture, gallium 67 scan, sinus films (radiography or CT)

Malignancies

No

Bone marrow biopsy

Autoimmune conditions

No

Temporal artery biopsy, lymph node biopsy

Miscellaneous

No

Bone marrow biopsy

MRI of the brain, biopsy of suspicious skin lesions or lymph nodes, liver biopsy, diagnostic laparoscopy

FIGURE 1. Algorithm for the diagnosis of fever of unknown origin. (CBC = complete blood count; LFT = liver function test; ESR = erythrocyte sedimentation rate; PPD = purified protein derivative; CT = computed tomography; AFB = acid-fast bacilli; HIV = human immunodeficiency virus; CMV = cytomegalovirus; EBV = Epstein-Barr virus; ASO = antistreptolysin-O antibodies; ANA = antinuclear antibody; TTE = transthoracic echocardiography; TEE = transesophageal echocardiography; MRI = magnetic resonance imaging)
Fever of Unknown Origin

However, because of its limited availability it is too early to determine if PET scans will prove to be a useful diagnostic tool in the evaluation of these patients.25,26

More invasive testing, such as lumbar puncture or biopsy of bone marrow, liver, or lymph nodes, should be performed only when clinical suspicion shows that these tests are indicated or when the source of the fever remains unidentified after extensive evaluation. When the definitive diagnosis remains elusive and the complexity of the case increases, an infectious disease, rheumatology, or oncology consultation may be helpful.

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REFERENCES


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<tbody>
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<tr>
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<td>MRI of brain</td>
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<td>PET scan</td>
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<td>Transthoracic or transesophageal echocardiography</td>
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<td>Venous Doppler study</td>
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FUO = fever of unknown origin; CT = computed tomography; MRI = magnetic resonance imaging; PET = positron emission tomography.