

# Merkel, the skin cancer that attacked Jimmy Buffett, is rare but aggressive



Credit: TNS

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Jimmy Buffett performs at Old School Square in Delray Beach, Florida, on May 13, 2021. He had Merkel cell carcinoma, a stealthy cancer of the skin. (Michael Laughlin/South Florida Sun Sentinel/TNS)

Unlike melanoma, the skin cancer that Jimmy Buffett was diagnosed with is rare.

And it's stealthier.

It's also aggressive: [Merkel cell carcinoma](#), like melanoma, can spread to the lymph nodes but often more quickly, said Dr. Vernon Sondak, a skin cancer expert in Florida.

It's harder to detect, lacking the signature of melanoma.

“When you go to the dermatologist, they’re looking for some very characteristic signs of skin cancer, like basal and squamous cell carcinoma; they’re looking for the ABCDs of melanoma,” said Sondak, chair of the Department of Cutaneous Oncology at the [H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute](#) in Tampa. “There are no reliable markers or indicators of Merkel cell cancer.”

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It tends to appear as a small reddish or purple bump under the skin that some might confuse with a cyst or a boil, an infection or a splinter. It's usually diagnosed through a biopsy.

If left unchecked, it can spread throughout the body like melanoma, though odds are it will spread more quickly.

So Sondak's advice: don't wait for an annual dermatology visit if something odd appears on your skin. Get it checked.

So why has virtually no one heard of Merkel?

It tends to attack older people who've spent time in the sun or have weakened immune systems, perhaps due to a bout with another cancer. Researchers have learned a lot about it in the past decade. For instance, treatments against melanoma also work against Merkel.

Those treatments can go on for months or even years. Then, once seemingly vanquished, Merkel can reappear, Sondak said.

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Despite its relative obscurity, this cancer is starting to make a name for itself. Former pro quarterback Terry Bradshaw revealed last year that he had it.

He said in a video posted on Facebook, seated on a couch with a dog on his lap, that he'd recently [beat two different kinds](#) of cancer. "The cancers are not there, so I'm not dying," he added. He told TODAY that after he'd beaten Merkel, he and his wife decided to [take a trip to Paris](#). He might have decades left, he said, but he was going to live like he had a year.

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