



ENDGAMES

CASE SCENARIO

Merkel cell carcinoma mistaken for allergic contact dermatitis

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A 91 year old woman presented to the emergency department with a five day history of an erythematous rash. She was diagnosed as having allergic contact dermatitis, but re-attended four days later. A 1.5 cm nodule had been excised from the same leg one month earlier. Histological examination showed that this was Merkel cell carcinoma—a rare and aggressive cutaneous cancer.



Learning points:

- Early growth of Merkel cell carcinoma lesions is typically rapid over weeks or months, with increasing nodularity (figure; arrow), ulceration, and early metastasis
- Diagnosis is often delayed, contributing to high mortality rates
- Unlike cellulitis and dermatitis, Merkel cell carcinomas are not tender, pruritic, or hot and the absence of these features plus florid nodularity and ulceration should alert clinicians to more sinister diagnoses

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