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Rare skin cancer nation's deadliest

Belinda Tasker

MOVE over melanoma, a little known form of skin cancer has taken the dubious title of being the most deadly form of the disease.

Scientists in Western Australia discovered that survival rates for people with merkel cell carcinoma (MCC) were far worse than those for melanoma, which has been widely regarded as the most lethal skin cancer.

They also found that WA had the highest rates of MCC in the world, with 215 cases diagnosed between 1993 and 2007.

Of those cases, 64 per cent of patients were still alive after five years compared with 90 per cent of those with melanoma.

Lead researcher Professor Lin Fritschi, of the WA Institute for Medical Research, said that while MCC was an aggressive form of skin cancer it was still relatively uncommon.

MCCs take the form of pink lumps on the skin, whereas melanomas are blackish in colour.

They are mostly found on the face, neck, arm and lower leg.

Like melanomas, MCCs are believed to be caused by sun exposure.

Older men, people with a history of skin cancer and those with suppressed immune systems are most at risk.