
Clinical size is a poor predictor of invasion in melanoma of the lentigo maligna type



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Background: There are no well-defined clinical factors to predict the risk of occult invasion in melanoma of the lentigo maligna type (LM) before complete histopathologic analysis.

Objective: To evaluate whether clinical size was a predictor of invasion in LM and subclinical extension.

Methods: Consecutive cases of LM were recorded in a prospectively maintained database from 2006 to 2019. Patient and tumor data were recorded during initial evaluation. The LM clinical area was calculated in square millimeters (length × width). All patients were treated with staged excision.

Results: We included 600 patients. The mean age was 65.9 years (standard deviation, 12.3; range, 27-95 years); 62.8% (n = 377) were men. The mean LM clinical area was 128.32 mm² for in situ lesions versus 200.14 mm for invasive lesions (P = .1). Based on quantile regression, the median margin required for complete removal increased with LM clinical area.

Limitations: The study was performed in a tertiary cancer center with possible referral bias and more complex cases.

Conclusions: LM can present with variable clinical size, which may correlate with subclinical extension; however, the presence of invasion is not well estimated by LM clinical area. (J Am Acad Dermatol 2021;84:1295-301.)

Key words: Breslow; invasion; head and neck; lentigo maligna; lentigo maligna melanoma; melanoma; prognosis.

Melanomas arising on chronically sun-damaged skin are commonly classified as the lentigo maligna (LM) subtype. These melanomas have a distinct clinical and genetic profile when compared to those arising in intermittently

exposed skin.¹⁻³ They account for 5% to 15% of all melanomas but are the most common melanomas on the head and neck region.⁴⁻⁷ Melanomas of the LM type typically present as large, ill-defined, solitary pigmented lesions. Because they occur in highly

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Funding sources: Supported in part by a grant from the National Cancer Institute/National Institutes of Health (P30-CA008748) made to the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

Disclosure: Dr Rossi has no relevant conflicts of interest related to this article but has received grant funding from The Skin Cancer Foundation and the A. Ward Ford Memorial Grant for research related to this work and has also served on the advisory board of, as a consultant for, or given educational presentations for Allergan, Galderma, Evolus, Elekta, Biofrontera, Quantia, Merz, Dynamed, Skinuvia, Perf-Action, and LAM Therapeutics. Dr Nehal

has received royalties from publishing companies for books and book chapters. Drs Navarrete-Dechent, Aleissa, Connolly, Hibler, Dusza, and Lee have no conflicts of interest to declare.

IRB approval status: Reviewed and approved by the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center IRB (no. 16-144).

Accepted for publication October 15, 2020.

Reprints not available from the authors.

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Published online October 20, 2020.

0190-9622/\$36.00

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2020.10.023>

functional and cosmetically sensitive areas, biopsies are often partial and may not show the true extent of disease, including occult invasion.⁸⁻¹¹

There are no well-defined clinical features to predict the risk of invasion in LM. A recent study showed that the sensitivity of a partial biopsy for diagnosing an invasive component was only 47%.⁹ Defining clinical predictors of invasion may improve LM management. This becomes particularly relevant when selecting patients for surgical versus nonsurgical management based on a partial biopsy.¹² The presence of invasive disease in LM may also have an impact on the surgical margins needed to clear.^{13,14} In addition, predicting the margins needed for tumor clearance can help counsel patients on anticipated surgical defect size and repair options.¹⁵

Given the frequent lack of complete clinical and histologic information available when deciding complex LM management, improved clinical predictors of invasion and subclinical extension are needed. In the present study, we sought to evaluate if LM clinical size was associated with invasion. Our secondary outcome was to determine the association between clinical size and surgical margins needed to clear LM on staged excision.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

This study was approved by the institutional review board of the study site. Consecutive cases of LM referred for evaluation to the dermatologic surgery service at a tertiary cancer center were prospectively recorded in a database from November 1, 2006, to April 1, 2019. We included patients 1) with biopsy-proven diagnosis of a primary melanoma of less than 1 mm depth, 2) with histopathologic subtype of LM, and 3) treated with staged excision. We excluded patients who were 1) treated with nonsurgical treatment modalities (ie, imiquimod, radiation therapy) given the lack of definitive histopathologic evaluation, 2) treated with wide local excision because of the absence of margin mapping, 3) presenting with incompletely excised or recurrent LM, and 4) treated at another institution after initial evaluation.

Patient demographics

Patient data (age, sex, skin type, hair color, eye color, and personal and family history of skin cancer) were recorded during initial evaluation.

LM lesion characteristics

LM lesion anatomic location was recorded. Clinical lesion size was determined by an expert dermatologic surgeon using physical examination, Wood's lamp, and dermoscopy¹⁶ and was recorded as the longest length and width (in millimeters). The longest length of the lesion in any axis was termed the *LM clinical diameter*. *LM clinical area* was calculated in square millimeters (length \times width) and as an ellipse [(0.5 \times length) \times (0.5 \times width) \times π] to account for lesion variability.

Surgery and histopathologic analysis

Initial biopsy and subsequent excision specimens were reviewed by a board-certified dermatopathologist, and Breslow depth (in millimeters) was recorded. Biopsy specimens were formalin-fixed and paraffin-embedded and routinely stained with hematoxylin-eosin. Special stains were used only if deemed necessary by the dermatopathologist. Staged excision was performed by a dermatologic surgeon, as described by Hazan et al.¹⁴ Initial surgical margins were based on National Comprehensive Cancer Network guidelines starting with 5- to 7-mm margins.¹⁷ Briefly, the center (debulking) of the lesion was processed with serial sections to determine the final Breslow depth, and the 4 clockwise quadrants were processed radially to evaluate the surgical margins. If residual melanoma was observed in any surgical margin quadrant, a subsequent excision was performed until margins were clear.¹⁴ Final Breslow depth used for analysis was the deepest measurement, whether it was in the initial biopsy or in the final excision. The *total surgical margin* required to clear LM was the maximum radial margin excised (in any quadrant, on each side) in millimeters.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics including means, medians, interquartile range, standard deviation, and relative frequencies were used to describe the study participants and characteristics of the procedures. Logistic regression was used to assess the relationship between invasion status with patient and surgical characteristics. Odds ratios along with 95% confidence intervals are included to express the strength and precision of the estimates. Because of

CAPSULE SUMMARY

- In this study of 600 patients with LM treated with staged excision, lesion diameter and area were poorly associated with the presence of invasion; however, larger lesions required wider surgical margins.
- Because LM lesions are unpredictable and clinical assessment is challenging, careful presurgical planning and margin-controlled techniques are necessary.

Abbreviations used:

CI: confidence interval
LM: lentigo maligna
SD: standard deviation

the skewed nature of the lesional area, lesion area was explored as both a continuous and a categorical variable in the analysis. When categorized, lesion area was recoded into quartiles of the distribution. Linear and quantile regression were used to explore the association between surgical margins required to completely remove the lesion and lesion area size (mm^2) while adjusting the estimates for in situ/invasive lesion classification. Predictive marginal mean estimates were calculated and plotted to depict the relationship between surgical margins and lesion area for in situ and invasive lesions. The alpha level was 5% for all comparisons, and all tests were 2 sided. Analyses were performed by using Stata, version 16.1 (StataCorp, College Station, TX).

RESULTS

A database search yielded 781 patients with biopsy-proven diagnosis of melanomas arising in chronic sun-damaged skin during the study period. Eighty-four patients were excluded; 28 had no surgery, 28 had a non-LM subtype, 14 were treated with wide local excision, 8 had missing data, 2 were treated with imiquimod, 2 were duplicates, 1 had radiation therapy, and 1 was lost to follow-up. A total of 697 patients with LM underwent staged excision; 44 recurrent and 53 incompletely excised cases were further excluded. Six hundred patients with primary LM were included in the final analysis.

Patient demographics

The mean age was 65.9 years (standard deviation [SD], 12.3; range, 27-95 years); 62.8% ($n = 377$) were men. The most common characteristics were skin type II (59.1%; $n = 317$), blue eyes (44.3%; $n = 252$), and brown hair (64.9%; $n = 366$). Overall, 47.9% ($n = 284$) had a history of nonmelanoma skin cancer, 31.4% ($n = 187$) had a personal history of melanoma, and 24.8% ($n = 144$) had a family history of melanoma (Table I).

LM lesion characteristics

Most LM lesions were located on the head and neck (87.6%; $n = 526$). The most common location was the central part of the face (55.3%; $n = 332$), including the cheeks (34.5%; $n = 207$), nose (12.7%; $n = 76$), and forehead (8.2%; $n = 49$). Two-hundred seventy lesions (45.0%) were on the left side, and 284

were on the right side (47.3%); 46 were on the midline (7.6%). Overall, 438 (73.0%) melanomas were in situ, and 162 (27.0%) were invasive, with a median final Breslow of depth of 0.3 mm (interquartile range, 0.3; mean, 0.44 mm; SD, 0.47; range, 0.1-3.9 mm).

Primary outcome: clinical lesion size versus invasion

The mean overall LM clinical diameter was 11.4 mm (SD, 8.3; range, 2-56 mm) (Table II). The mean LM clinical diameter was 10.76 mm for in situ versus 13.17 mm for invasive LM ($P = .01$). Fig 1 shows the average LM clinical diameter for in situ and invasive LM. In contrast, the difference in LM clinical area (length \times width) for in situ and invasive LM was not statistically significant (128.32 mm^2 for in situ vs 200.14 mm^2 for invasive cases; $P = .1$). Additionally, no differences were found when calculating LM clinical area as an ellipse (Table II). No association was seen between other clinical features (age, sex, anatomic location, and laterality) and the presence of in situ or invasive LM.

Secondary outcome: clinical lesion size versus total surgical margin

Overall, LM cases required a median of 8 mm in the longest radial surgical margin (on each side) for clearance (SD, 3.5; range, 2-29 mm), 7.0 mm for in situ and 10.0 mm for invasive lesions. Forty-six percent ($n = 279$) of cases required a single stage for complete clearance, 43.5% required 2 stages, and 10% ($n = 60$) required 3 or 4 stages. Based on quartile regression, the median margin required for complete removal for in situ lesions on the first quartile of LM clinical area (smallest lesions) was 5 mm (95% confidence interval [CI], 4.4-5.6). For the second to the fourth quartiles of LM clinical area, the median margin for complete removal for in situ lesions was 7 mm (95% CI, 5.5-8.8). These analyses also showed that invasive lesions required, on average, 3 mm (95% CI, 2.3-3.7; $P < .001$) more in overall margins for complete removal for each lesion quartile category. Fig 2 presents graphical representation of adjusted marginal means of the difference in surgical margins between in situ and invasive LM/lentigo maligna melanoma by overall lesion area.

DISCUSSION

In this study including 600 patients with primary LM treated with staged excision over a 13-year period, clinical lesion size was a poor predictor of invasion. The mean clinical lesion diameter of invasive LM was 2.41 mm greater than in situ LM (13.17 vs 10.76 mm), which achieved statistical

Table I. Distribution of patient characteristics by final status of in situ versus invasive melanoma, lentigo maligna type*

Variable	Coding	Melanoma, in situ (n = 438)	Melanoma, invasive (n = 162)	Melanoma, total (n = 600)	OR (95% CI)	P value
Age at surgery, mean (SD)	Continuous	65.7 (12.1)	66.4 (12.7)	65.9 (12.3)	1.0 (1.0-1.0)	.303
Sex, n (%)	Female	162 (37)	61 (37.7)	223 (37.2)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Male	276 (63)	101 (62.4)	377 (62.8)	1.0 (0.7-1.4)	.881
Eye color, n (%)	Green	41 (9.8)	13 (8.7)	54 (9.5)	1.4 (0.7-2.9)	.388
	Blue	182 (43.4)	70 (46.7)	252 (44.3)	1.0 (1.0-2.7)	.035
	Brown	131 (31.3)	30 (20)	161 (28.3)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Hazel	65 (15.5)	37 (24.7)	102 (17.9)	2.5 (1.4-4.4)	.002
Hair color, n (%)	Red	27 (6.5)	19 (12.6)	46 (8.2)	2.1 (1.1-3.9)	.025
	Blonde	99 (24)	36 (23.8)	135 (23.9)	1.1 (0.7-1.7)	.775
	Brown	273 (66.1)	93 (61.6)	366 (64.9)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Black	14 (3.4)	3 (2)	17 (3)	0.6 (0.2-2.2)	.474
Skin type, n (%)	I	25 (6.4)	14 (9.7)	39 (7.3)	1.0 (referent)	—
	II	235 (60)	82 (56.9)	317 (59.1)	0.6 (0.3-1.3)	.186
	III	130 (33.2)	47 (32.6)	177 (33)	0.6 (0.3-1.3)	.243
	IV	2 (0.5)	1 (0.7)	3 (0.6)	0.9 (0.1-10.7)	.929
Personal history of NMSC, n (%)	No	223 (51.4)	86 (54.1)	309 (52.1)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Yes	211 (48.6)	73 (45.9)	284 (47.9)	0.9 (0.6-1.3)	.559
Personal history of melanoma, n (%)	No	287 (66.1)	121 (75.2)	408 (68.6)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Yes	147 (33.9)	40 (24.8)	187 (31.4)	0.6 (0.4-1.0)	.036
Family history of melanoma, n (%)	No	324 (76.4)	113 (72)	437 (75.2)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Yes	100 (23.6)	44 (28)	144 (24.8)	1.3 (0.8-1.9)	.272
Anatomic site	Cheek	159 (36.3)	48 (29.6)	207 (34.5)	1.0 (referent)	—
	Nose	60 (13.7)	16 (9.9)	76 (12.7)	0.9 (0.5-1.7)	.704
	Periorbital	12 (2.7)	6 (3.7)	18 (3)	1.7 (0.6-4.6)	.338
	Temple	19 (4.3)	8 (4.9)	27 (4.5)	1.4 (0.6-3.4)	.462
	Chin	13 (3)	2 (1.2)	15 (2.5)	0.5 (0.1-2.3)	.386
	Lips	9 (2.1)	0 (0)	9 (1.5)	—	—
	Forehead	34 (7.8)	15 (9.3)	49 (8.2)	1.5 (0.7-2.9)	.280
	Jawline	3 (0.7)	0 (0)	3 (0.5)	—	—
	Extremity	28 (6.4)	19 (11.7)	47 (7.8)	2.2 (1.2-4.4)	.017
	Neck	19 (4.3)	10 (6.2)	29 (4.8)	1.7 (0.8-4.0)	.190
	Periauricular	28 (6.4)	16 (9.9)	44 (7.3)	1.9 (0.9-3.8)	.071
	Scalp	33 (7.5)	16 (9.9)	49 (8.2)	1.6 (0.8-3.2)	.171
	Trunk	21 (4.8)	6 (3.7)	27 (4.5)	0.9 (0.4-2.5)	.911

CI, Confidence interval; NMSC, nonmelanoma skin cancer; OR, odds ratio; SD, standard deviation.

*ORs along with 95% CIs are included to show the association between lesion status and patient characteristics.

significance. However, this relatively small difference when using lesion diameter does not appear to be clinically meaningful, because LM lesion area did not predict invasion. Furthermore, no other clinical variables (age, sex, anatomic location, laterality) predicted invasion. Thus, LM clinical size alone cannot be used as a clinical factor for predicting invasive disease.

Two recent studies have examined histopathologic factors associated with occult invasion in LM.^{9,12} Moreno et al¹² showed that the presence of melanocytes forming rows, more than 25% of melanocytes forming nests, subepidermal clefts, and a lesser degree of solar elastosis on an LM biopsy

specimen were associated with the finding of LM invasion on complete excision.¹² Aouidad et al⁹ found that a pagetoid spread of tumor cells and moderate to strong dermal inflammation on initial biopsy samples were associated with invasion on subsequent excision.⁹ Interestingly, in their study (n = 100), they also found no association between clinical criteria (age, sex, size, and LM type [primary/recurrent]), although data were not shown.⁹ Our study similarly found no clinical variables to portend invasion in LM.

Although LM clinical lesion size did not reliably predict invasion, it was associated with subclinical extension. We found that the larger the LM lesion

Table II. Summary measures of longest diameter of lesion and lesion area, by lesion status (in situ and invasive)

Variable	Categorized	n	Mean	SD	Median	IQR	Minimum	Maximum	P value
Longest LM diameter	In situ	438	10.76	7.53	8	9	2	56	.010
	Invasive	162	13.17	9.87	11	10	2	55	
	Overall	600	11.41	8.29	9	9	2	56	
LM lesion area (length × width)	In situ	438	128.32	220.92	64	119	4	2240	.113
	Invasive	162	200.14	394.92	66	138	4	2750	
	Overall	600	147.72	280.28	64	123.5	4	2750	
LM lesion area [(0.5 × length) × (0.5 × width) × π]	In situ	438	100.78	173.50	64	50.3	4	2240	.113
	Invasive	162	157.18	310.16	66	51.8	4	2750	
	Overall	600	116.02	220.12	64	50.3	3.1	2159.8	

IQR, Interquartile range; LM, lentigo maligna; SD, standard deviation.

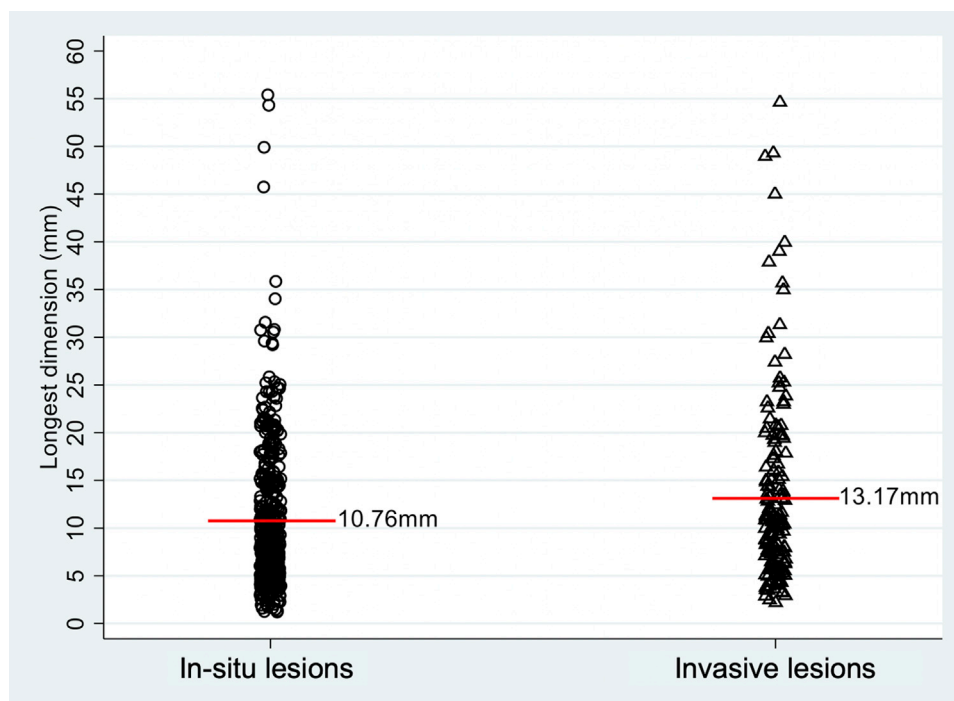


Fig 1. Scatterplot of lentigo maligna clinical diameter (in millimeters) and invasion stratified by status of lesion (in situ vs invasive).

area, the greater the total surgical margins needed for clearance when evaluating LM lesion area by quartiles. The margins needed to clear LM increased logarithmically in larger lesions. According to previous studies, smaller lesions have been associated with fewer stages.^{13,14,18,19} For lesions 3.0 cm² or larger, 29% required a margin of more than 6 mm compared with those smaller than 3.0 cm² in which 7% required margins larger than 6 mm.¹⁸ Hazan et al¹⁴ showed that lesions larger than 2 cm had an average margin of 13.1 mm versus lesions smaller than 1 cm, which had margins of 8.6 mm.¹⁴ Shin et al¹⁹ showed that preoperative size of larger than 1.0 cm was associated with subclinical spread, defined as greater than 1 stage on Mohs surgery to

achieve tumor-free margins. In the same study, location on the head and neck was also associated with a higher risk of subclinical spread (odds ratio, 2.13; 95% CI, 1.37-3.34).¹⁹ Moyer et al¹³ showed similar results regarding clinically calculated area and margins needed to clear a melanoma with the square technique. They also showed in a multivariate analysis that lesion size was associated with a 9% increase in rate of local recurrence per each 50-mm² increase in area of the primary lesion.¹³ Our results were similar to the previous studies, and margins were 3 mm larger for invasive lesions.

This study shows that no clinical features can reliably predict the presence of invasive disease in LM. However, we often make management decisions

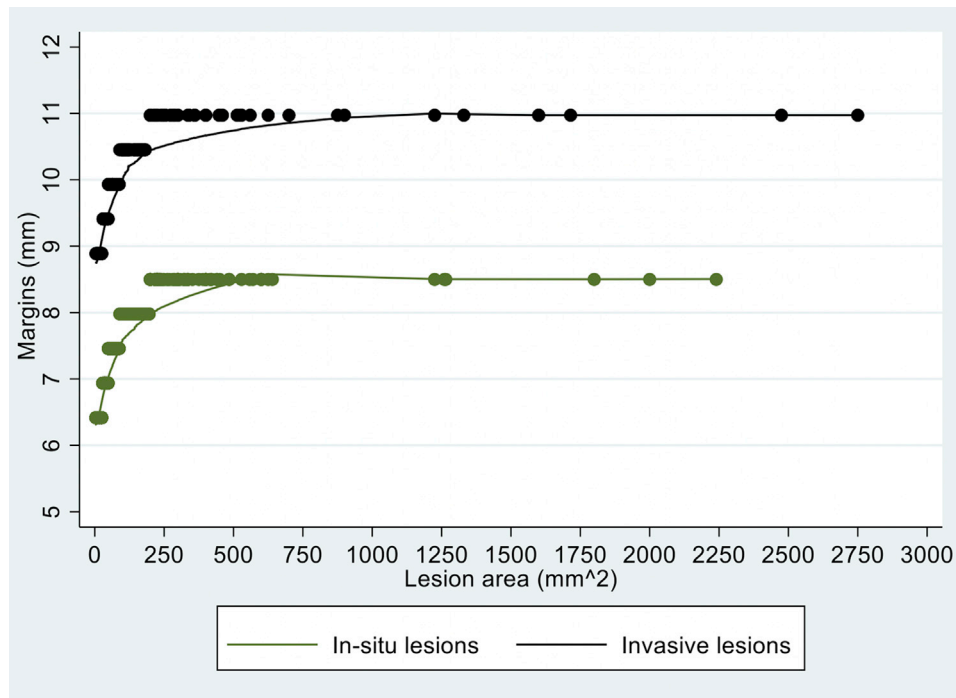


Fig 2. Relation between primary lesion area (in square millimeters) and the margins needed for histopathologic clearance for lentigo maligna.

based on partial biopsy samples. It becomes challenging to decide when nonsurgical options (eg, imiquimod, radiation therapy) can be considered safely in specific patients who might not be good surgical candidates.^{6,17} The advent of novel noninvasive tools such as dermoscopy and reflectance confocal microscopy may improve the presurgical prediction of invasive disease and surgical margin planning. Dermoscopy has facilitated the diagnosis of LM and also detected areas of potential invasion by showing suspicious features such as obliteration of hair follicles.²⁰⁻²³ Reflectance confocal microscopy has been shown to aid in the diagnosis of both primary^{20,24} and recurrent²⁵ LM as well as to help estimate the subclinical extension and evaluate incompletely excised LM.²⁶⁻³⁰ More widespread use of these noninvasive technologies is expected with the growing body of knowledge and experience worldwide.^{31,32}

Limitations

This study was performed in a tertiary cancer center with possible referral bias and more complex cases than those seen in the general population. Furthermore, correlation of LM lesion size to invasion was limited to lesions presenting with a Breslow thickness of less than 1 mm.

CONCLUSION

LM can present with variable clinical size; however, the presence of invasion is not reliably predicted by clinical size or other clinical characteristics. Larger lesions tend to have more subclinical extension and, therefore, may need additional surgical margins for clearance. Given that margins can be larger than those required for clearance of other melanoma subtypes of equivalent Breslow depth, the use of surgical techniques that use complete margin assessment before surgical reconstruction is recommended.³³ This information should be integrated into clinical shared decision-making tools.³⁴

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