



Published in final edited form as:

J Am Acad Dermatol. 2019 May ; 80(5): 1403–1409. doi:10.1016/j.jaad.2019.01.005.

Melanoma and Melanoma In-Situ Diagnosis after Excision of Atypical Intraepidermal Melanocytic Proliferation (AIMP): A Retrospective Cross-Sectional Analysis

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Abstract

Background: There is little evidence to guide surgical management of biopsies yielding the histologic descriptor “atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation” (AIMP).

Objective: Determine frequency of and factors associated with melanoma and melanoma in-situ (MIS) diagnoses after excision of AIMP and evaluate margins used to completely excise AIMP.

Methods: Retrospective, cross-sectional study of 1127 biopsies reported as AIMP and subsequently excised within one academic institution.

Results: Melanoma (in-situ, stage 1A) was diagnosed after excision in 8.2% (92/1127) of AIMP samples. Characteristics associated with melanoma/MIS diagnosis included age 60–79 (OR 8.1, 95% CI 2.5–26.2), age ≥ 80 (OR 7.2, 95% CI 1.7–31.5), head/neck location (OR 4.9, 95% CI 3.1–7.7), clinical lesion partially biopsied (OR 11.0, 95% CI 6.7–18.1), and lesion extending to deep biopsy margin (OR 15.1, 95% CI 1.7–136.0). Average surgical margin used to excise AIMP lesions was 4.5mm (SD 1.8).

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure:

Non Relevant Disclosures for Anthony M. Rossi, MD: Mavig: Travel; Merz: Consultant; Dynamed: Consultant; Canfield Scientific: Consultant; Allergan Inc: Advisory Board; Evolus: Consultant; Biofrontera: Consultant; Quantia MD: Consultant; Lam Therapeutics: Consultant

ASLMS: A Ward Memorial Research Grant

Skin Cancer Foundation: Research Grant

Limitations: Single-site, retrospective, observational study; interobserver variability across dermatopathologists.

Conclusion: Dermatologists and pathologists can endeavor to avoid ambiguous melanocytic designations whenever possible through excisional biopsy technique, interdisciplinary communication, and ancillary studies. In the event of AIMP biopsy, physicians should consider the term a histological description rather than a diagnosis, and, during surgical planning, use clinicopathologic correlation while bearing in mind factors that might predict true melanoma/MIS.

Keywords

Atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation; atypical junctional melanocytic hyperplasia; atypical junctional melanocytic proliferation; lentiginous junctional melanocytic proliferation; Melanoma; melanoma in situ; excision; biopsy; atypical melanocytic proliferation; ambiguous melanocytic lesions

Melanocytic proliferations lie along a continuum of increasing histologic atypia from benign to malignant. Within this spectrum exists a subset of lesions that is intrinsically difficult to classify. Atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation (AIMP) is a descriptive histopathologic term commonly used in these cases to denote morphology sharing some features with melanoma but failing to meet criteria of a definitive benign or malignant diagnosis.¹ Given the ambiguous malignant potential of these lesions and the possibility of remaining subclinical melanoma or melanoma in-situ (MIS), a biopsy report describing AIMP warrants consideration for formal surgical excision with margins outside the biopsy site and any remaining pigmented lesion.

We aim to elucidate AIMP ontology and to add data to a growing body of dermatologic and dermatopathologic literature describing surgical outcomes of ambiguous melanocytic lesions.²⁻⁴ We report the percentage of AIMP biopsies with post-excision melanoma/MIS diagnoses, describe clinical and histopathologic biopsy characteristics associated with this outcome, and evaluate the margins used for complete AIMP excision. This data will aid in patient counseling and surgical planning for AIMP.

METHODS

Experimental design

The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center institutional review board approved this analysis. A text search of surgical pathology reports (January 1992 – July 2016) using AIMP and synonyms included: “atypical junctional melanocytic proliferation / hyperplasia,” “atypical melanocytic proliferation,” “lentiginous junctional melanocytic proliferation,” and “proliferation of solitary units of melanocytes at the dermoepidermal junction.” Inclusion criteria were biopsied lesions: (1) with slides described using the above search terms by in-house pathologists and (2) subsequently excised at our institution.

Excluded biopsies were those reported to most likely represent melanoma/MIS, given the assumption that our dermatologists would interpret – and subsequently treat – this description as true malignancy. Conversely, AIMP reported “unlikely” to be melanoma/MIS

were included, assuming that our dermatologists would not approach these as definitively benign entities.

Data collection

Data abstracted from biopsy reports included date, patient age, biopsy type, and gross specimen dimensions. Pathology report text was assessed for term used (AIMP or synonyms listed above), presence of pagetoid spread, description of a second surrounding or colliding histopathologic component (i.e. nevus, carcinoma), positive margin presence/location, and special studies (immunohistochemical stains, molecular studies). The pathologist's description was ranked by degree of diagnostic uncertainty: (1) unlikely melanoma/MIS or melanoma/MIS not mentioned, (2) "cannot exclude melanoma/MIS," and (3) melanoma /MIS listed in the differential diagnosis.

Pre-biopsy clinical lesion size, personal melanoma/MIS history, and any local treatment prior to biopsy were recorded from the medical record. Clinical, operative, and pathology reports corresponding to each biopsy's subsequent excision were assessed for: residual pigment presence/absence, treating specialty, surgical treatment type, treatment date, days between biopsy and treatment, margins of clinically normal-appearing tissue removed around the biopsied lesion, and final histopathologic description/diagnosis. When serial excisions (multiple standard excisions or staged-excision technique with delayed reconstruction) were required to attain negative histopathologic margins, total number of excisions was recorded with margins summed to yield a "total margin used to clear."

Figure 1 details the algorithm used to determine whether biopsies represented full or partial samples of the clinically-apparent pigment of their original lesions. The excision note was first examined for commentary about residual pigment at the previously-biopsied site. If no such notation was found, the original biopsy note from clinic was assessed for biopsy type. If there was no record of an intentional excisional biopsy, gross specimen size was compared to clinical lesion size as a tertiary assessment.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and graphical methods were used to describe patient characteristics, lesions, surgical procedures, and histologic lesion evaluations. Descriptive and relative frequencies and 95% exact binomial confidence intervals were used to present melanoma/MIS diagnosis burden. Logistic regression was used to present association between post-excision melanoma/MIS diagnosis and patient/lesion characteristics. All analyses were performed with Stata v14.2, Stata Corporation, College Station, TX.

RESULTS

Our database search yielded 1898 potential AIMP biopsies subsequently excised in-house. After excluding samples deemed "most likely" melanoma/MIS, 1127 biopsies remained for inclusion. Clinical and histopathologic characteristics are recorded in Table I and Table II, respectively.

Of 1127 AIMP biopsies, 515 were performed at outside institutions with slides subsequently reviewed and labeled AIMP by our pathologists. Of the remaining 612 biopsies performed in-house, 296 (48%) received adjunctive dermatopathologic studies in addition to hematoxylin/eosin staining prior to biopsy reporting. The institution's three dermatopathologists at time of data collection read 85.4% of biopsies and excisions.

The two cases ultimately treated with amputation were both AIMP reported in nail units, one of which yielded a post-amputation diagnosis of MMIS.

Melanoma/MIS diagnosis after excision and surgical margins

Of 1127 biopsies interpreted as AIMP, 92 (8.2%, 95% CI: 6.6–9.9%) were diagnosed as MIS (86/92) or invasive melanoma (6/92, ranging 0.2–0.6mm) following excision. Excluding samples yielding scar on excision, 21% (92/442) were diagnosed as melanoma/MIS. Factors associated with melanoma/MIS diagnosis are outlined in Table III. Characteristics with greatest odds of melanoma/MIS diagnosis were age 60–79 (OR 8.1, 95% CI 2.5–26.2), age 80 (OR 7.2, 95% CI 1.7–31.5), head/neck location (OR 4.9, 95% CI 3.1–7.7), partial biopsy of visible clinical lesion (OR 11.0, 95% CI 6.7–18.1), and deep biopsy margin involvement (OR 15.1, 95% CI 1.7–136.0). Male sex, prior local treatment, and melanoma/MIS noted in differential diagnosis yielded statistically significant but smaller odds ratios.

After controlling for partial biopsy, all melanoma/MIS-associated characteristics remained significant (male sex, OR 2.0, 95% CI 1.3–3.2; age 60–79, OR 9.0, 95% CI 2.7–30.0; age 80, 95% CI 1.8–38.3; head/neck location, OR 3.4, 95% CI 2.1–5.6; melanoma/MIS in differential diagnosis, OR 4.0, 95% CI 2.3–7.0; positive deep margin, OR 18.3, 95% CI 1.9–172.6), except for history of prior treatment, which lost significance (OR 1.4; 95% CI 0.6–3.2).

Average surgical margin used to excise AIMP lesions was 4.5mm (SD 1.8), with 94.9% (1070/1127) requiring one excision. Positive or equivocal margins led to serial excisions in 5.1% (57/1127) of cases. For the 86 samples ultimately diagnosed as MIS, average surgical margin was 6.5mm (SD 2.4); for the six invasive melanomas, 10.4mm (SD 5.6).

DISCUSSION

Central to this study is identification of partial biopsies, here defined as those failing to capture all visible pigment from their source lesions. These showed odds of melanoma/MIS 11 times those of full biopsies: intentional excisional biopsies and punch/shave biopsies of all visible pigment. Although the American Academy of Dermatology and National Comprehensive Cancer Network recommend narrow excisional biopsies encompassing the clinically-apparent breadth of suspicious melanocytic lesions,^{5,6} a desire to spare tissue in cosmetically- and/or functionally- sensitive areas may prompt a decision to partially sample a lesion, inevitably increasing risk of sampling error. Ultimately, complete sampling of suspicious pigmented lesions – providing dermatopathologists with maximum pathologic diagnostic information – is likely to be in the patient's best interest. Cases potentially inappropriate for complete excisional biopsy, such as broad lesions with suspected

horizontal spread near vital anatomy, may benefit from multiple scouting biopsies to optimize diagnostic accuracy.

An average 4.5mm margin was used to clear AIMP lesions, aligning with the lower bound of NCCN's 5–10mm recommendation for MIS wide excision.⁷ Those AIMP ultimately diagnosed MIS, however, yielded an average 6.5mm surgical margin for histologic clearance, possibly due to re-excisions carried out after MIS diagnosis. This further underscores the utility of full pigmented lesion biopsies, which may reduce likelihood of ambiguous biopsy descriptions leading to re-excisions.

Our study revealed nearly all characteristics associated with melanoma/MIS diagnosis to remain significant after controlling for partial biopsy, diverging from a recent analysis of head/neck, hand, and foot AIMP biopsies in which partial biopsy was the only clinicopathologic factor associated with post-excision melanoma/MIS.⁴ These other clinical characteristics may thus remain useful to prognosticate greater or lower melanoma/MIS odds even for full lesion biopsies.

Our study's total melanoma/MIS rate is higher than that of a prior study – which reported 4.2% melanoma/MIS amongst 306 AIMP biopsies² – likely secondary to our cancer center-derived study population. The analyses reveal similar melanoma/MIS-associated characteristic profiles, notably head/neck location, positive deep margin, and melanoma/MIS in initial biopsy differential.² Diverging from the prior study, we report neither hand/foot location nor punch biopsy technique to associate with melanoma/MIS diagnosis.² The significance of this is unclear and may reflect differing institutional sampling practices and pathology reporting.

There is interobserver variability inherently associated with a subjective histopathologic descriptor such as AIMP. That we do not explicitly account for this variability is a limitation of our study. Other limitations include the study's retrospective nature and restriction to one academic cancer center subject to referral bias.

CONCLUSION

The intrinsic diagnostic uncertainty of biopsies reported as AIMP presents a therapeutic dilemma. Factors associated with post-excision melanoma/MIS diagnosis, particularly incomplete clinical pigment sampling, deep biopsy margin involvement, and age ≥ 60 , should prompt consideration to excise with surgical margins in line with MIS guidelines. In carefully selected clinical settings, complete biopsies with few risk factors may lead the clinician not to intervene further.

While AIMP and other similar descriptors may periodically be unavoidable, further steps can and should be taken to minimize ambiguity in melanocytic biopsies. Complete excisional biopsies of suspicious pigmented lesions and clinical information-sharing with pathologists (lesion size, appearance, and history; full vs. partial biopsy) enhance clinicopathologic correlation. Noninvasive imaging such as dermoscopy and reflectance confocal microscopy aid in diagnosis and mapping before or after biopsy, particularly in cosmetically- or functionally-sensitive areas unfavorable for excisional biopsy.⁸ Pathologists

might also curtail ambiguous biopsy descriptions with ancillary diagnostic techniques. Immunohistochemistry, cytogenetics, and gene expression assays have shown potential in improving diagnostic precision, particularly in combination with clinical imaging approaches.¹ The conversation about AIMP must underscore effective interdisciplinary communication between dermatologist and pathologist to minimize ambiguity and optimize management of atypical melanocytic lesions.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the entire dermatopathology department of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, including Drs. Cecilia Lezcano, Travis Hollmann, and Melissa Pulitzer.

This study was performed under the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center Retrospective Research IRB Protocol 16-450

Funding Sources: This research was funded in part through the NIH/NCI Cancer Center Support Grant P30 CA008748

Abbreviations and acronyms

AIMP

AMP

L/JMP

MIS

NR

OR

SD

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Capsule Summary

- Factors associated with malignancy diagnosis after excision of atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation include incomplete sampling (lateral/deep margin), head/neck location, and age > 60.
- Ambiguous melanocytic biopsy designations should be avoided, but, when present, warrant clinicopathologic correlation, with malignancy risk factors prompting consideration to excise as melanoma in-situ.

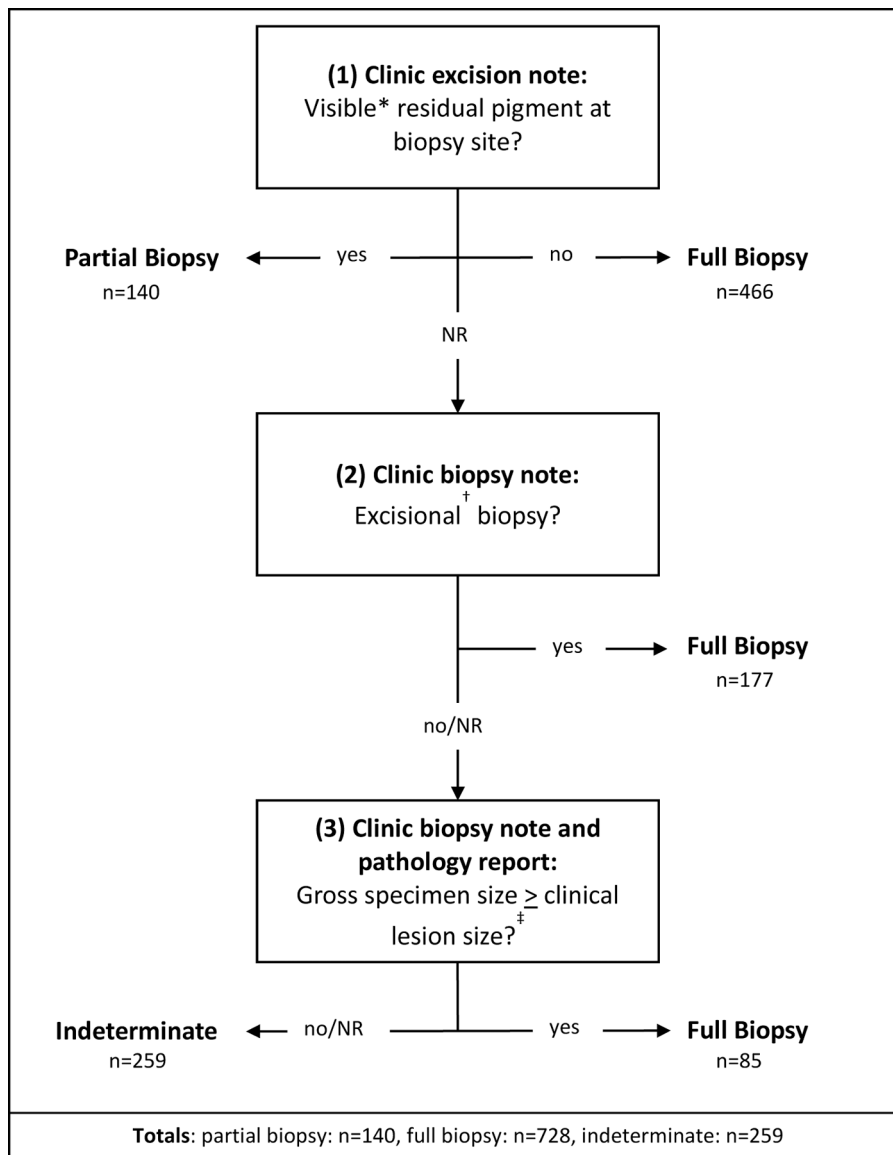


Figure 1. Algorithm to Determine Full Versus Partial Biopsy for 1127 AIMP Lesions.

NR, not recorded

*Including Woods Lamp examination

†Including shave removal, shave excision, punch removal, punch excision, saucerization

‡Assumes shrinkage of gross tissue

Table I.

Clinical characteristics of sample

Clinical variables	N (%)
Mean age at biopsy (SD)[range], years	56.4 (15.2) [7–93]
Sex	
Female	658 (58.3)
Male	469 (41.6)
Anatomic location	
Head / neck	192 (17.0)
Trunk / extremity	827 (73.4)
Hand / foot	86 (7.6)
Nail	13 (1.2)
Genitalia	9 (0.8)
Mean lesion diameter (SD)[range], mm *	6.6 (5.6)[1 –50]
Melanoma/MIS history	
Yes	440 (39.0)
No	676 (60.0)
Not recorded	11 (1.0)
Prior treatment for lesion	
Yes (laser/biopsy/excision/not specified)	60 (5.3)
No	1056 (93.7)
Not recorded	11 (1.0)
Treating specialty	
Dermatology	909 (80.7)
Surgical oncology	188 (16.7)
Other (head/neck surgery, plastic surgery, hand surgery, gynecologic surgery)	30 (2.7)
Follow-up treatment	
Excision	1062 (94.2)
Shave excision	47 (4.2)
Punch excision	16 (1.4)
Amputation	2 (0.2)
Average time between biopsy and treatment (SD) [range], days †	69 (45) [3–2214]
AIMP re-excision diagnosis	
Melanoma	6 (0.5)
Melanoma in-situ	86 (7.6)
Atypical melanocytic lesion §	266 (23.6)
Atypical/dysplastic nevus	37 (3.3)
Benign nevus	23 (2.0)
Other, benign	24 (2.1)

Clinical variables	N (%)
Scar	685 (60.8)
Average margin used to clear (SD) [range], mm [‡]	4.5 (1.8) [1–19]
Serial excisions needed	
No	1070 (94.9)
Yes, 2	53 (4.7)
Yes, 3	4 (0.4)

SD, standard deviation; *mm*, millimeters; *AIMP*, atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation

* Data available for 505 samples

† Data available for 1121 samples

‡ Data available for 945 excisions

§ Composite category of atypical melanocytic diagnoses and descriptors, including AIMP, atypical junctional melanocytic hyperplasia, melanocytic hyperplasia, etc.

Table II.

Histopathologic characteristics of sample biopsies

Clinical variables	N (%)
Biopsy type	
Shave	702 (62.3)
Punch	66 (5.9)
Excisional biopsy	247 (21.9)
Nail biopsy	12 (1.1)
Not recorded	100 (8.9)
Full vs. partial biopsy	
Full	728 (64.6)
Partial	140 (12.4)
Indeterminate	259 (23.0)
Term used to describe pathology	
Atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation	728 (64.6)
Lentiginous / junctional melanocytic proliferation	328 (29.1)
Atypical melanocytic proliferation	71 (6.3)
Degree of melanoma/MIS uncertainty	
Least likely melanoma/MIS / does not mention melanoma	501 (44.5)
Cannot exclude melanoma/MIS	248 (22.0)
Melanoma/MIS in differential	378 (33.5)
Pagetoid spread	
Yes	266 (23.6)
No	861 (76.4)
Collision lesion	
With a nevus / other melanocytic lesion	289 (25.6)
With a non-melanocytic lesion	85 (7.5)
No collision reported	753 (66.8)
Margins involved in biopsy specimen?	
Lateral	334 (29.6)
Deep / deep and lateral	31 (2.8)
Unspecified positive margin	274 (24.3)
Negative margin explicitly noted	80 (7.1)
Not recorded	408 (36.2)
Special stains performed in-house? *	
Yes	296 (48.3)
Not recorded	316 (51.6)

* 612 biopsies performed in-house, 515 biopsies performed at outside institutions

Table III.

Clinical and histopathologic variables associated with melanoma/melanoma in-situ diagnosis after excision of AIMP

Characteristics	Total n (%)	Melanoma/MIS diagnosis after excision		Odds ratio, melanoma/MIS diagnosis after excision (95% CI)
		No n (%)	Yes n (%)	
Sex				
Female	658 (58.4)	619 (59.8)	39 (42.4)	1.0 (referent)
Male	469 (41.6)	416 (40.2)	53 (57.6)	2.0 (1.3 – 3.1)
Age				
<40	172 (15.3)	169 (16.4)	3 (3.3)	1.0 (referent)
40–59	428 (38.2)	404 (39.3)	24 (26.1)	3.3 (1.0 – 11.3)
60–79	477 (42.6)	417 (40.5)	60 (65.2)	8.1 (2.5 – 26.2)
80	44 (3.9)	39 (3.8)	5 (5.4)	7.2 (1.7 – 31.5)
Anatomic location				
Trunk/extremity	827 (73.4)	782 (75.6)	45 (48.9)	1.0 (referent)
Head/neck	192 (17)	150 (14.5)	42 (45.7)	4.9 (3.1 – 7.7)
Hand/foot	86 (7.6)	85 (8.2)	1 (1.1)	0.2 (0.0 – 1.5)
Other (nail & genital)	22 (2.0)	18 (1.7)	3 (4.3)	2.9 (0.8 – 10.2)
Melanoma/MIS history				
No	676 (60.6)	629 (61.4)	47 (51.1)	1.0 (referent)
Yes	440 (39.4)	395 (38.6)	45 (48.9)	1.5 (1.0– 2.3)
Prior treatment for lesion				
No	1056 (94.6)	974 (95.1)	82 (89.1)	1.0 (referent)
Yes	60 (5.4)	50 (4.9)	10 (10.9)	2.4 (1.2 – 4.9)
Biopsy type				
Shave	702 (68.3)	638 (67.4)	64 (79.0)	1.0 (referent)
Punch	66 (6.4)	56 (5.9)	10 (12.4)	1.8 (0.9 – 3.7)
Excision	247 (24.1)	242 (25.6)	5 (6.2)	0.2 (0.1 – 0.5)
Nail	12 (1.2)	10 (1.1)	2 (2.5)	2.0 (0.4 – 9.3)
Biopsy				
Full	728 (64.6)	696 (67.3)	32 (34.8)	1.0 (referent)
Partial	140 (12.4)	93 (9)	47 (51.1)	11.0 (6.7 – 18.1)
Indeterminate	259 (23)	246 (23.8)	13 (14.1)	1.1 (0.6 – 2.2)
Term used to describe pathology				
AIMP	728 (64.6)	666 (64.4)	62 (67.4)	1.0 (referent)
L/JMP	328 (29.1)	303 (29.3)	25 (27.2)	0.9 (0.5 – 1.4)

Characteristics	Total n (%)	Melanoma/MIS diagnosis after excision		Odds ratio, melanoma/MIS diagnosis after excision (95% CI)
		No n (%)	Yes n (%)	
AMP	71 (6.3)	66 (6.4)	5 (5.4)	0.8 (0.3 – 2.1)
Degree of melanoma/MIS uncertainty				
Least likely melanoma/MIS / does not mention melanoma/MIS	501 (44.5)	481 (46.5)	20 (21.7)	1.0 (referent)
Cannot exclude melanoma/MIS	248 (22)	230 (22.2)	18 (19.6)	1.9 (1.0 – 3.6)
Melanoma/MIS in differential	378 (33.5)	324 (31.3)	54 (58.7)	2.0 (1.5 – 2.6)
Pagetoid spread				
No	861 (76.4)	786 (75.9)	75 (81.5)	1.0 (referent)
Yes	266 (23.6)	249 (24.1)	17 (18.5)	0.7 (0.4 – 1.2)
Collision lesion				
No collision reported	753 (66.8)	690 (66.7)	63 (68.5)	1.0 (referent)
With a nevus / other melanocytic lesion	289 (25.6)	264 (25.5)	25 (27.2)	1.0 (0.6 – 1.7)
With a non-melanocytic lesion	85 (7.5)	81 (7.8)	4 (4.4)	0.5 (0.2 – 1.5)
Margins involved in biopsy specimen				
Negative margin explicitly noted	80 (7.1)	79 (10.1)	1 (1.1)	1.0 (referent)
Lateral	334 (29.6)	306 (39.0)	28 (30.4)	7.2 (1.0 – 53.9)
Deep / deep and lateral	31 (2.8)	26 (3.3)	5 (5.4)	15.1 (1.7 – 136.0)
Unspecified positive margin	274 (24.3)	250 (31.8)	24 (26.1)	7.6 (1.0 – 57.0)
Not recorded	408 (36.2)	374 (47.6)	34 (37.0)	7.2 (1.0 – 53.2)
Special stains performed in-house*				
No	316 (51.6)	288 (51.1)	28 (58.3)	1.0 (referent)
Yes	296 (48.3)	276 (48.9)	20 (41.7)	0.7 (0.4 – 1.4)

AIMP, atypical intraepidermal melanocytic proliferation; *CI*, confidence interval; *LJMP*, lentiginous/junctional melanocytic proliferation; *AMP*, atypical melanocytic proliferation

* 515 biopsies performed at outside institution; 612 biopsies performed in-house