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BIOCHEM 1070
01/31/2026

Best Practices for Precision Laser Biopsy: Surgical Oncology Manual

This manual outlines the specialized techniques for performing incisional and excisional laser biopsies, focusing on the integration of computer-guided programming and physical tissue manipulation.

I. Pre-Procedure: Digital Mapping and Shape Definition

Laser biopsy utilizes concentrated light energy to remove or sample tissue with high precision. Modern systems allow for the programming of reproducible shapes to ensure consistent sampling.

- **Software Design**: Use CAD or vector-based software (e.g., Adobe Illustrator) to design the desired surgical path, such as circles, squares, or freehand paths.
- **Vectorization Settings**: Ensure all shapes are converted to paths rather than complex compound paths, which can confuse laser control software.
- **Technical Specifications**: Set stroke weights to match the machine's precision requirements, often a **0.001" line**, to ensure clean, precise cuts.
- **Parameter Optimization**: Define laser parameters including power, speed, and pulse frequency to manage the depth and width of the incision.

II. Surgical Field Preparation: Skin Spreading & Tension

Proper skin manipulation is critical for creating a cleaner wound and a more precise shape.

- **Tension Application**: Manually spread and pull the skin surrounding the target area to create a taut surface.
- **Directional Alignment**: Skin should be stretched at an angle **perpendicular to the skin tension lines** (Langer's lines).
- **Clinical Rationale**: Stretching perpendicular to these lines creates an elliptical wound that, when released, minimizes puckering ("dog ears"), reduces tension on wound edges, and leads to less noticeable scarring.
- **Stabilization**: Use surgical tape to secure the skin in its pulled position to ensure the tissue does not shift during ablation.
- **Precise Shape Maintenance**: This tension allows the laser to penetrate uniformly, preventing the tissue from bunching and ensuring the resulting wound matches the digital design exactly.

III. Laser-Computer Interface and Execution

The integration of digital imaging ensures the laser traces the exact path defined in the software.

- **Boundary Visualization**: The system projects the programmed boundary onto the patient's skin, aligning the digital design with the physical anatomy.
- **Depth and Shape Monitoring**: A computer-generated image provides real-time visualization of the laser's trajectory, showing both the incision shape and the programmed ablation depth.
- **Precise Placement**: Use "Print and Cut" tools to align digital designs with physical on-screen camera images, ensuring the laser cuts in the correct spot.
- **Automated Ablation:** Once the skin is taped and the alignment is confirmed, the laser traces the vector lines exactly as defined in the software.

IV. Intraoperative Advantages and Considerations

Laser technology offers several clinical benefits over traditional surgical methods.

- **Hemostasis (Bloodless Field)**: The laser vaporizes tissue while simultaneously sealing blood vessels. This creates a bloodless field, improving visibility and reducing the risk of infection.
- **Precision and Reduced Pain:** Laser biopsy offers high precision with less postoperative pain and faster healing.
- **Reduced Morbidity**: Benefits include less postoperative pain, less swelling, and faster healing compared to conventional scalpels.
- **Managing "Laser Artifacts"**: The intense heat can create thermal damage at incision margins, which may challenge pathological analysis for dysplasia.
    - **Best Practice**: It is recommended to widen the excision margin to avoid these effects.
    - **Handling**: Surgeons must use gentle tissue handling to avoid distortion that could interfere with diagnosis.

V. Post-Operative Strategy

- **Wound Closure**: Because the laser seals vessels, it often removes the need for sutures.
- **Healing Management**: Reduced tension on the wound, achieved through proper skin spreading, leads to faster healing and minimizes the risk of widened or hypertrophic scars.

To optimize the efficacy of laser biopsies while minimizing thermal artifacts, the following power and speed settings are recommended. These parameters are designed to balance rapid ablation with the precise hemostasis required for surgical oncology.

2. General Configuration Logic

The primary goal is to achieve **high irradiance** (power per unit area) to vaporize tissue quickly, which limits the time for heat to conduct into the surrounding margins.

- **Speed:** Higher speeds reduce the "dwell time" of the laser, decreasing the risk of carbonization.
- **Power:** Sufficient wattage must be used to ensure the beam penetrates the target depth in a single pass.

VI. Tissue-Specific Parameter Settings

Dermatological Tissue (Skin)

Skin has a higher resistance and varying thickness depending on the anatomical site.

- **Laser Type:** CO2 (10,600 nm) is preferred for its high water absorption.
- **Power Settings:** 10–15 Watts.
- **Mode:** Pulsed or Super-Pulse (to allow for thermal relaxation between peaks).
- **Speed:** 15–20 mm/s.
- **Focal Spot Size:** 0.2 mm to 0.3 mm for a fine, scalpel-like incision.
- **Rationale:** Higher power is needed to move quickly through the dermis without "dragging" or causing excessive charring to the specimen margins.

Oral Soft Tissue (Mucosa)

Oral tissues are highly vascular and have a high water content, requiring precise hemostasis.

- **Laser Type:** Diode (810–980 nm) or Nd:YAG for deep coagulation, or CO2 for surface precision.
- **Power Settings:** 3–5 Watts (Diode) or 5–8 Watts (CO2).
- **Mode:** Continuous Wave (for maximum hemostasis) or Gated Pulse (to protect delicate underlying structures).
- **Speed:** 5–10 mm/s.
- **Rationale:** Lower power and slower speeds compared to skin allow the laser to seal the dense capillary networks in the oral cavity, ensuring a bloodless field.

Dense Fibrotic Tumors

For incisional biopsies of tougher, collagen-rich masses:

- **Power Settings:** 15–20 Watts.
- **Speed:** 10 mm/s.
- **Rationale:** The density of the tissue requires higher energy to achieve clean ablation; however, speed is moderated to ensure the laser cuts through the entire thickness of the programmed shape.

VII. Critical Adjustment Protocols

- **The "First Pass" Rule:** Always aim to complete the incision in a single pass at the defined depth. Multiple passes at lower power increase cumulative thermal damage (laser artifacts) to the pathology specimen.
- **Vector stroke width:** Ensure the digital design uses a **0.001" stroke width**. This keeps the energy concentrated in a narrow path, reducing the volume of tissue being vaporized and improving the precision of the resulting shape.
- **Fluid Management:** For oral or wet-field biopsies, ensure the area is clear of excess saliva or blood, as fluids will absorb the laser energy and reduce the effective power reaching the tissue.

VIII. Summary Table for Programming

Tissue Type	Recommended Power	Recommended Speed	Mode
Thin Skin	8-10 Watts	20 mm/s	Super-Pulse
Thick Skin/Dermis	12-15 Watts	15 mm/s	Super-Pulse
Oral Mucosa	4-6 Watts	8 mm/s	Gated Pulse
Fibrotic Mass	15-20 Watts	10 mm/s	Continuous

3. Troubleshooting Tissue Charring and Thermal Artifacts

In laser surgical oncology, "charring" or carbonization occurs when the laser’s energy delivery exceeds the tissue's ability to dissipate heat. When using computer-guided systems, this is often a result of an imbalance between the programmed speed and the power setting relative to the tissue density.

IX. Identifying the "Dwell Time" Imbalance

The primary cause of charring is excessive **dwell time**—the amount of time the laser beam remains focused on a single point. If the computer-guided speed is set too low for a specific tissue density, the laser continues to heat the same area after vaporization has occurred, leading to carbonization.

- **Symptom:** Blackening of the incision edges and a visible "smoke" (plume) increase during the cut.
- **Pathology Impact:** Charring creates "laser artifacts" that can obscure cellular margins, making it difficult for pathologists to determine if the tumor has been fully excised (clear margins).

X. Corrective Programming Adjustments

If charring is observed during the initial laser pass, the following software and hardware adjustments should be made:

- **Increase Velocity (Speed):** The most effective way to reduce charring is to increase the speed of the laser head. This reduces the energy density per millimeter.
    - *Adjustment:* Increase the speed in increments of 5 mm/s until the blackening ceases.
- **Transition to Super-Pulse Mode:** Instead of a Continuous Wave (CW), switch to Super-Pulse. This delivers high-peak power in very short bursts, allowing for "thermal relaxation" between pulses where the tissue can cool.
- **Adjust Stroke Weight:** Ensure the vector line is set to exactly **0.001"**. A thicker stroke weight in the software tells the laser to "fill" or dwell longer on the path, causing unnecessary heat buildup.

XI. Physical and Environmental Troubleshooting

Sometimes the issue lies not in the programming, but in the physical state of the surgical field:

- **Tissue Tension Check:** Ensure the skin is properly spread **perpendicular to Langer's lines**. If the skin is loose or "bunched," the laser will hit more tissue volume than intended, slowing its effective transit and increasing heat accumulation.
- **Fluid Accumulation:** Excess blood or saline on the surface will absorb the laser energy, converting it into heat rather than clean ablation.
    - *Solution:* Use high-volume evacuation (HVE) to keep the field dry and clear the laser plume, which can otherwise scatter the beam and cause collateral thermal damage.
- **Focal Point Calibration:** If the laser is "out of focus," the energy is spread over a larger area (lower irradiance), which "cooks" the tissue rather than vaporizing it. Re-calibrate the computer-guided Z-axis to ensure the focal point is exactly at the tissue surface.

XII. Troubleshooting Summary Matrix

Observation	Probable Cause	Immediate Correction
Blackened Edges (Char)	Speed too low / Dwell time too high	Increase programmed Speed (mm/s)
Gaping/Irregular Shape	Tension parallel to Langer's Lines	Re-tape skin perpendicular to tension lines
Incomplete Cut/Depth	Power too low for density	Increase Wattage or decrease Speed slightly
Specimen "Shriveling"	High cumulative thermal damage	Switch to Super-Pulse mode

4. Pathological Protocol for Laser-Excised Specimens

When laser ablation is utilized for incisional or excisional biopsies, the intense thermal energy can create a zone of coagulation and carbonization at the margins. To ensure an accurate diagnosis—particularly when evaluating for clear margins in oncology—pathologists must follow a specialized handling protocol.

XIII. Immediate Post-Excision Stabilization

Because the laser seals vessels and creates a thermal "crust," the specimen may resist standard fixative penetration more than a scalpel-excised sample.

- **Rapid Fixation:** Immediately submerge the specimen in **10% Neutral Buffered Formalin (NBF)**.
- **Volume Ratio:** Maintain a minimum 10:1 ratio of fixative to tissue to ensure the thermally altered surface does not prevent the stabilization of the deeper, diagnostic cells.

XIV. Specimen Orientation and Inking

Laser-excised tissue can appear uniform or "shriveled" due to thermal contraction, making orientation difficult.

- **Surgeon-Pathologist Coordination:** The surgeon should provide a suture marker at a specific pole (e.g., 12 o'clock or deep margin) prior to laser release.
- **Differential Inking:** Use multiple colors of surgical ink to distinguish the laser-cut surgical margins. This allows the pathologist to identify if a positive margin is a result of the primary disease or a "pseudo-margin" caused by laser artifact.

XV. Macro-Analysis and Measurement of the Thermal Zone

During gross examination, the pathologist must account for the "lost" tissue at the margins.

- **Documenting the Burn Zone:** Measure the thickness of the carbonized layer (the "char").
- **Margin Reporting:** When reporting clearance, note if the margin is "involved," "clear," or "obscured by thermal artifact." If the charring is extensive, the pathologist must state that the true margin status cannot be determined.

XVI. Micro-Analysis: Identifying Laser Artifacts

Pathologists must be trained to distinguish between cellular dysplasia and laser-induced morphological changes:

- **"Streaming" Nuclei:** Thermal energy can cause nuclei to stretch or elongate, mimicking high-grade dysplasia.
- **Cytoplasmic Vacuolization:** The rapid heating of intracellular water can create vacuoles that resemble clear-cell changes.
- **Coagulative Necrosis:** A thin band of eosinophilic (pink) tissue at the edge is expected; cells within this zone should be disregarded for diagnostic grading.

XVII. Advanced Processing for Obscured Margins

If the primary diagnostic area is compromised by thermal damage:

- **Deeper Sectioning:** If the surface is charred, request "levels" or deeper sections into the block to reach tissue that was further from the initial laser path.
- **Immunohistochemistry (IHC):** In cases where thermal damage makes it difficult to identify cell types (e.g., distinguishing between squamous cell carcinoma and thermal necrosis), utilize IHC markers (like p16 or cytokeratins) which often remain stable even in moderately thermally altered tissue.

XVIII. Collaborative Feedback Loop

- **Reporting Artifact Levels:** If the pathologist consistently sees charring exceeding 0.5mm, they must notify the surgeon to increase the computer-guided laser speed or switch to a Super-Pulse mode for subsequent procedures to preserve diagnostic integrity.

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