GROSS ANATOMY OF THE KIDNEY

OpenStax College

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Abstract

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the external structure of the kidney, including its location, support structures, and covering
- Identify the major internal divisions and structures of the kidney
- Identify the major blood vessels associated with the kidney and trace the path of blood through the kidney
- Compare and contrast the cortical and juxtamedullary nephrons
- Name structures found in the cortex and medulla
- Describe the physiological characteristics of the cortex and medulla

The kidneys lie on either side of the spine in the retroperitoneal space between the parietal peritoneum and the posterior abdominal wall, well protected by muscle, fat, and ribs. They are roughly the size of your fist, and the male kidney is typically a bit larger than the female kidney. The kidneys are well vascularized, receiving about 25 percent of the cardiac output at rest.

There have never been sufficient kidney donations to provide a kidney to each person needing one. Watch this video¹ to learn about the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Conference held in March 2011. In this video, Dr. Anthony Atala discusses a cutting-edge technique in which a new kidney is “printed.” The successful utilization of this technology is still several years in the future, but imagine a time when you can print a replacement organ or tissue on demand.

¹http://www.ted.com/talks/dr_anthony_atala_printing_a_kidney.html

*Version 1.3: Jun 19, 2013 3:26 pm -0500
†http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/
²http://opencourseware.mit.edu/course/6-052j-advanced-therapeutics-spring-2010/
1 External Anatomy

The left kidney is located at about the T12 to L3 vertebrae, whereas the right is lower due to slight displacement by the liver. Upper portions of the kidneys are somewhat protected by the eleventh and twelfth ribs (Figure 1 (Kidneys)). Each kidney weighs about 125–175 g in males and 115–155 g in females. They are about 11–14 cm in length, 6 cm wide, and 4 cm thick, and are directly covered by a fibrous capsule composed of dense, irregular connective tissue that helps to hold their shape and protect them. This capsule is covered by a shock-absorbing layer of adipose tissue called the renal fat pad, which in turn is encompassed by a tough renal fascia. The fascia and, to a lesser extent, the overlying peritoneum serve to firmly anchor the kidneys to the posterior abdominal wall in a retroperitoneal position.

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**Figure 1:** The kidneys are slightly protected by the ribs and are surrounded by fat for protection (not shown).

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On the superior aspect of each kidney is the adrenal gland. The adrenal cortex directly influences renal function through the production of the hormone aldosterone to stimulate sodium reabsorption.
2 Internal Anatomy

A frontal section through the kidney reveals an outer region called the **renal cortex** and an inner region called the **medulla** (Figure 2 (Left Kidney)). The **renal columns** are connective tissue extensions that radiate downward from the cortex through the medulla to separate the most characteristic features of the medulla, the **renal pyramids** and **renal papillae**. The papillae are bundles of collecting ducts that transport urine made by nephrons to the **calyces** of the kidney for excretion. The renal columns also serve to divide the kidney into 6–8 lobes and provide a supportive framework for vessels that enter and exit the cortex. The pyramids and renal columns taken together constitute the kidney lobes.

![Left Kidney](http://cnx.org/content/m46429/1.3/)

3 Renal Hilum

The **renal hilum** is the entry and exit site for structures servicing the kidneys: vessels, nerves, lymphatics, and ureters. The medial-facing hila are tucked into the sweeping convex outline of the cortex. Emerging from the hilum is the renal pelvis, which is formed from the major and minor calyces in the kidney. The smooth muscle in the renal pelvis funnels urine via peristalsis into the ureter. The renal arteries form directly from the descending aorta, whereas the renal veins return cleansed blood directly to the inferior vena cava. The artery, vein, and renal pelvis are arranged in an anterior-to-posterior order.
3.1 Nephrons and Vessels

The renal artery first divides into segmental arteries, followed by further branching to form interlobar arteries that pass through the renal columns to reach the cortex (Figure 3 (Blood Flow in the Kidney)). The interlobar arteries, in turn, branch into arcuate arteries, cortical radiate arteries, and then into afferent arterioles. The afferent arterioles service about 1.3 million nephrons in each kidney.

Nephrons are the “functional units” of the kidney; they cleanse the blood and balance the constituents of the circulation. The afferent arterioles form a tuft of high-pressure capillaries about 200 µm in diameter, the glomerulus. The rest of the nephron consists of a continuous sophisticated tubule whose proximal end surrounds the glomerulus in an intimate embrace—this is Bowman’s capsule. The glomerulus and Bowman’s capsule together form the renal corpuscle. As mentioned earlier, these glomerular capillaries filter the blood based on particle size. After passing through the renal corpuscle, the capillaries form a second arteriole, the efferent arteriole (Figure 4 (Blood Flow in the Nephron)). These will next form
a capillary network around the more distal portions of the nephron tubule, the **peritubular capillaries** and **vasa recta**, before returning to the venous system. As the glomerular filtrate progresses through the nephron, these capillary networks recover most of the solutes and water, and return them to the circulation. Since a capillary bed (the glomerulus) drains into a vessel that in turn forms a second capillary bed, the definition of a portal system is met. This is the only portal system in which an arteriole is found between the first and second capillary beds. (Portal systems also link the hypothalamus to the anterior pituitary, and the blood vessels of the digestive viscera to the liver.)
Figure 4: The two capillary beds are clearly shown in this figure. The efferent arteriole is the connecting vessel between the glomerulus and the peritubular capillaries and vasa recta.
Visit this link\(^2\) to view an interactive tutorial of the flow of blood through the kidney.

3.2 Cortex

In a dissected kidney, it is easy to identify the cortex; it appears lighter in color compared to the rest of the kidney. All of the renal corpuscles as well as both the **proximal convoluted tubules (PCTs)** and **distal convoluted tubules** are found here. Some nephrons have a short **loop of Henle** that does not dip beyond the cortex. These nephrons are called **cortical nephrons**. About 15 percent of nephrons have long loops of Henle that extend deep into the medulla and are called **juxtamedullary nephrons**.

4 Chapter Review

As noted previously, the structure of the kidney is divided into two principle regions—the peripheral rim of cortex and the central medulla. The two kidneys receive about 25 percent of cardiac output. They are protected in the retroperitoneal space by the renal fat pad and overlying ribs and muscle. Ureters, blood vessels, lymph vessels, and nerves enter and leave at the renal hilum. The renal arteries arise directly from the aorta, and the renal veins drain directly into the inferior vena cava. Kidney function is derived from the actions of about 1.3 million nephrons per kidney; these are the “functional units.” A capillary bed, the glomerulus, filters blood and the filtrate is captured by Bowman’s capsule. A portal system is formed when the blood flows through a second capillary bed surrounding the proximal and distal convoluted tubules and the loop of Henle. Most water and solutes are recovered by this second capillary bed. This filtrate is processed and finally gathered by collecting ducts that drain into the minor calyces, which merge to form major calyces; the filtrate then proceeds to the renal pelvis and finally the ureters.

5 Review Questions

**Exercise 1**

The renal pyramids are separated from each other by extensions of the renal cortex called ________.

a. renal medulla  

b. minor calyces  

c. medullary cortices  

d. renal columns

**Solution on p. 9.**

**Exercise 2**

The primary structure found within the medulla is the ________.

a. loop of Henle  

b. minor calyces

**Solution on p. 9.**

\(^2\)http://openstaxcollege.org/l/bloodflow5

http://cnx.org/content/m46429/1.3/
Exercise 3
The right kidney is slightly lower because _______.

a. it is displaced by the liver  
b. it is displaced by the heart  
c. it is slightly smaller  
d. it needs protection of the lower ribs

6 Critical Thinking Questions

Exercise 4
What anatomical structures provide protection to the kidney?

Exercise 5
How does the renal portal system differ from the hypothalamo-hypophyseal and digestive portal systems?

Exercise 6
Name the structures found in the renal hilum.
Solutions to Exercises in this Module

to Exercise (p. 7)
D

to Exercise (p. 7)
A

to Exercise (p. 8)
A

to Exercise (p. 8)
Retropéritoneal anchoring, renal fat pads, and ribs provide protection to the kidney.

to Exercise (p. 8)
The renal portal system has an artery between the first and second capillary bed. The others have a vein.

to Exercise (p. 8)
The structures found in the renal hilum are arteries, veins, ureters, lymphatics, and nerves.

Glossary

Definition 1: Bowman’s capsule
cup-shaped sack lined by a simple squamous epithelium (parietal surface) and specialized cells
called podocytes (visceral surface) that participate in the filtration process; receives the filtrate
which then passes on to the PCTs

Definition 2: calyces
cup-like structures receiving urine from the collecting ducts where it passes on to the renal pelvis
and ureter

Definition 3: cortical nephrons
nephrons with loops of Henle that do not extend into the renal medulla

Definition 4: distal convoluted tubules
portions of the nephron distal to the loop of Henle that receive hyposmotic filtrate from the loop
of Henle and empty into collecting ducts

Definition 5: efferent arteriole
arteriole carrying blood from the glomerulus to the capillary beds around the convoluted tubules
and loop of Henle; portion of the portal system

Definition 6: glomerulus
tuft of capillaries surrounded by Bowman’s capsule; filters the blood based on size

Definition 7: juxtamedullary nephrons
nephrons adjacent to the border of the cortex and medulla with loops of Henle that extend into the
renal medulla

Definition 8: loop of Henle
descending and ascending portions between the proximal and distal convoluted tubules; those of
cortical nephrons do not extend into the medulla, whereas those of juxtamedullary nephrons do
extend into the medulla

Definition 9: nephrons
functional units of the kidney that carry out all filtration and modification to produce urine; consist
of renal corpuscles, proximal and distal convoluted tubules, and descending and ascending loops of
Henle; drain into collecting ducts

Definition 10: medulla
inner region of kidney containing the renal pyramids
Definition 11: peritubular capillaries
Second capillary bed of the renal portal system; surround the proximal and distal convoluted tubules; associated with the vasa recta

Definition 12: proximal convoluted tubules (PCTs)
Tortuous tubules receiving filtrate from Bowman’s capsule; most active part of the nephron in reabsorption and secretion

Definition 13: renal columns
Extensions of the renal cortex into the renal medulla; separates the renal pyramids; contains blood vessels and connective tissues

Definition 14: renal corpuscle
Consists of the glomerulus and Bowman’s capsule

Definition 15: renal cortex
Outer part of kidney containing all of the nephrons; some nephrons have loops of Henle extending into the medulla

Definition 16: renal fat pad
Adipose tissue between the renal fascia and the renal capsule that provides protective cushioning to the kidney

Definition 17: renal hilum
Recessed medial area of the kidney through which the renal artery, renal vein, ureters, lymphatics, and nerves pass

Definition 18: renal papillae
Medullary area of the renal pyramids where collecting ducts empty urine into the minor calyces

Definition 19: renal pyramids
Six to eight cone-shaped tissues in the medulla of the kidney containing collecting ducts and the loops of Henle of juxtamedullary nephrons

Definition 20: vasa recta
Branches of the efferent arterioles that parallel the course of the loops of Henle and are continuous with the peritubular capillaries; with the glomerulus, form a portal system