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KIDNEY HISTOLOGY AND HISTOPATHOLOGY

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Annotation: The kidney is a vital excretory organ responsible for filtering blood, regulating fluid and electrolyte balance, maintaining acid-base homeostasis, and producing hormones such as erythropoietin and renin. Histologically, the kidney is a highly specialized organ composed of multiple structural units that work together to perform filtration, reabsorption, and secretion. The study of kidney histology involves examining the microscopic organization of the renal parenchyma, which is broadly divided into the cortex and the medulla, each with distinct structural and functional characteristics.

Key words: kidney, microscopic organization, cortex, medulla.

Cortex

The renal cortex is the outer portion of the kidney and contains the renal corpuscles and most of the convoluted tubules. The renal corpuscle is the initial filtering component of the nephron and consists of the glomerulus — a tuft of capillaries — and Bowman's capsule, a double-walled epithelial structure that encloses the glomerulus. The visceral layer of Bowman's capsule is composed of podocytes, specialized epithelial cells with foot processes that wrap around glomerular capillaries, forming part of the filtration barrier. The parietal layer is made of simple squamous epithelium and transitions into the proximal convoluted tubule at the urinary pole.

Surrounding the renal corpuscle are two types of tubules: the proximal convoluted tubules (PCT) and the distal convoluted tubules (DCT). The proximal tubule has a simple cuboidal epithelium with a prominent brush border of microvilli, indicating its high reabsorptive activity. These cells are rich in mitochondria and engage in active transport of solutes like sodium, glucose, and amino acids. In contrast, the distal convoluted tubule has a cleaner lumen, lacks a brush border, and is involved primarily in sodium and potassium balance and pH regulation. The macula densa, a specialized group of cells in the distal tubule, senses sodium concentration and interacts with juxtaglomerular cells to regulate blood pressure via renin secretion.

Medulla

The medulla lies deep to the cortex and is divided into renal pyramids. It contains the loops of Henle, collecting ducts, and vasa recta — specialized capillaries that maintain osmotic gradients. The loop of Henle has descending and ascending limbs lined by different epithelia: the thin segments are composed of simple squamous cells, while the thick ascending limb consists of cuboidal epithelium that actively transports ions but is impermeable to water.

The collecting ducts begin in the cortex and extend through the medulla, eventually merging into papillary ducts that open at the renal papilla into the minor calyces. These ducts are lined by principal cells and intercalated cells. Principal cells regulate water and sodium

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reabsorption through aquaporins and aldosterone-sensitive sodium channels. Intercalated cells are involved in hydrogen and bicarbonate ion exchange, crucial for acid-base balance.

Interstitium and Vasculature

The kidney's interstitium consists of fibroblasts, immune cells, and interstitial fluid, all of which contribute to the kidney's structural support and immune surveillance. The vasculature of the kidney is elaborate and adapted for efficient filtration and exchange. The afferent arteriole enters the glomerulus, where filtration occurs, and the efferent arteriole exits the glomerulus. In cortical nephrons, the efferent arteriole gives rise to peritubular capillaries, whereas in juxtamedullary nephrons, it forms the vasa recta that extend into the medulla and are critical for maintaining the counter-current exchange system.

The juxtaglomerular apparatus (JGA) is a specialized structure located near the vascular pole of the glomerulus. It comprises the macula densa, juxtaglomerular (JG) cells, and extraglomerular mesangial cells. The JG cells secrete renin in response to decreased blood pressure or sodium levels, thereby initiating the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system (RAAS), which regulates systemic blood pressure and fluid balance.

Histological Variations and Clinical Correlations

Under light microscopy, normal kidney tissue exhibits a precise organization of tubules, glomeruli, and vascular structures. Changes in histological appearance often reflect pathological processes. For example, glomerulonephritis may present with glomerular hypercellularity, basement membrane thickening, or crescent formation. Tubular necrosis, commonly seen in ischemic injury, is characterized by epithelial sloughing and loss of brush borders. In diabetic nephropathy, mesangial matrix expansion and nodular glomerulosclerosis (Kimmelstiel–Wilson nodules) are common features. Amyloidosis shows amorphous eosinophilic material in glomeruli and vessels, which can be confirmed by Congo red staining and apple-green birefringence under polarized light.

Kidney Histopathology

Kidney histopathology is the microscopic study of structural and cellular changes in renal tissue due to disease. As the kidneys are involved in critical functions such as filtration, fluid balance, blood pressure regulation, and waste excretion, a wide range of systemic and localized diseases can affect their histological architecture. Histopathologic evaluation of kidney biopsies plays a vital role in diagnosing glomerular diseases, tubular injuries, interstitial inflammation, and vascular pathologies. This section outlines the key patterns of renal injury, the morphological features of major renal diseases, and the diagnostic significance of these changes in clinical nephrology.

One of the most diagnostically significant areas in kidney histopathology is the glomerulus, the site of blood filtration. Glomerular diseases can be broadly classified into primary glomerulopathies, which originate within the kidney, and secondary glomerular diseases, which occur as part of systemic disorders. A hallmark of many glomerular diseases is glomerular basement membrane (GBM) alteration, which may include thickening, splitting, or loss of integrity. For instance, in minimal change disease (MCD), the glomeruli appear

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nearly normal under light microscopy, but electron microscopy reveals widespread effacement of podocyte foot processes. This condition is a common cause of nephrotic syndrome, especially in children.

In focal segmental glomerulosclerosis (FSGS), segments of some glomeruli exhibit sclerosis and hyalinosis. These changes result from podocyte injury and are often accompanied by proteinuria and progressive renal insufficiency. Membranous nephropathy is characterized histologically by uniform thickening of the GBM due to subepithelial immune complex deposits, which can be visualized with special stains such as silver or immunofluorescence. In membranoproliferative glomerulonephritis (MPGN), glomerular hypercellularity and "double contour" or "tram-track" appearances of the capillary walls are observed due to mesangial cell interposition and immune complex deposition.

Glomerulonephritis refers to a group of disorders marked by inflammation of the glomeruli. In post-infectious glomerulonephritis, large, hypercellular glomeruli with neutrophilic infiltration and subepithelial “hump-like” deposits are typical. In contrast, rapidly progressive glomerulonephritis (RPGN) is characterized by the formation of crescents—accumulations of proliferating parietal epithelial cells and inflammatory cells in Bowman’s space—indicating severe glomerular injury and rapid loss of kidney function. IgA nephropathy, the most common form of primary glomerulonephritis globally, shows mesangial hypercellularity and matrix expansion, along with IgA deposits detectable by immunofluorescence microscopy.

Beyond glomerular disease, tubulointerstitial pathology is also central to kidney histopathology. In acute tubular injury (ATI), which can result from ischemia or nephrotoxins, the proximal tubules show epithelial cell flattening, loss of brush borders, cell necrosis, and luminal debris. Chronic tubulointerstitial nephritis is marked by tubular atrophy, interstitial fibrosis, and chronic inflammatory cell infiltration, often leading to irreversible renal impairment. Tubulointerstitial involvement is also prominent in diseases such as pyelonephritis, where acute inflammation of the interstitium and tubules is commonly caused by bacterial infection. Histologically, this is evidenced by neutrophilic infiltration, tubular necrosis, and, in chronic cases, thyroidization — tubules filled with eosinophilic casts resembling thyroid follicles.

The vascular compartment of the kidney is affected in various systemic diseases. In hypertensive nephrosclerosis, the most common renal complication of chronic hypertension, arteries and arterioles display hyaline arteriolosclerosis, intimal thickening, and narrowing of the lumina. In malignant hypertension, fibrinoid necrosis of arterioles and hyperplastic arteriolitis with "onion-skin" concentric hyperplasia are seen. Thrombotic microangiopathies (TMA), such as hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) and thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura (TTP), show fibrin thrombi in glomerular capillaries and arterioles, endothelial swelling, and mesangiolysis.

Infiltrative and systemic diseases can also affect the kidney’s histology. In amyloidosis, amorphous eosinophilic material is deposited in glomeruli, arterioles, and interstitium. Congo red staining reveals apple-green birefringence under polarized light. Lupus nephritis, associated with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), exhibits a wide range of histological patterns classified by the ISN/RPS system—from minimal mesangial involvement to diffuse

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proliferative glomerulonephritis—with extensive immune complex deposition seen by immunofluorescence ("full house" staining for IgG, IgA, IgM, C3, and C1q). In diabetic nephropathy, glomerular basement membranes are thickened, mesangial matrix is expanded, and nodular sclerosis (Kimmelstiel–Wilson nodules) may appear, accompanied by hyaline arteriosclerosis of afferent and efferent arterioles.

Immunohistochemistry and special stains are vital in renal histopathology. Periodic acid–Schiff (PAS) highlights the basement membranes and mesangial matrix. Masson's trichrome stains collagen and is used to assess fibrosis. Silver stains such as Jones' methenamine silver outline the GBM and help identify double contours. Immunofluorescence studies detect immunoglobulin and complement deposits and are essential for diagnosing immune-mediated nephropathies. Electron microscopy provides ultrastructural detail of the GBM, mesangial matrix, and podocyte foot processes.

In summary, kidney histopathology encompasses a broad spectrum of diseases affecting the glomeruli, tubules, interstitium, and vasculature. Histological examination using light microscopy, immunofluorescence, and electron microscopy provides invaluable insights into the underlying pathogenesis, classification, and severity of renal diseases. Accurate histological interpretation is critical for effective diagnosis, prognostication, and guiding appropriate treatment strategies in nephrology.

Conclusion

Kidney histology reveals a complex architecture designed for precise control of blood filtration and fluid homeostasis. The cortex contains glomeruli and convoluted tubules involved in filtration and reabsorption, while the medulla manages urine concentration and water conservation. Specialized structures like the juxtaglomerular apparatus and vasa recta illustrate the kidney's role in endocrine and regulatory functions. Modern histological techniques not only aid in understanding normal renal physiology but also serve as essential tools in diagnosing and monitoring a wide range of renal pathologies.

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