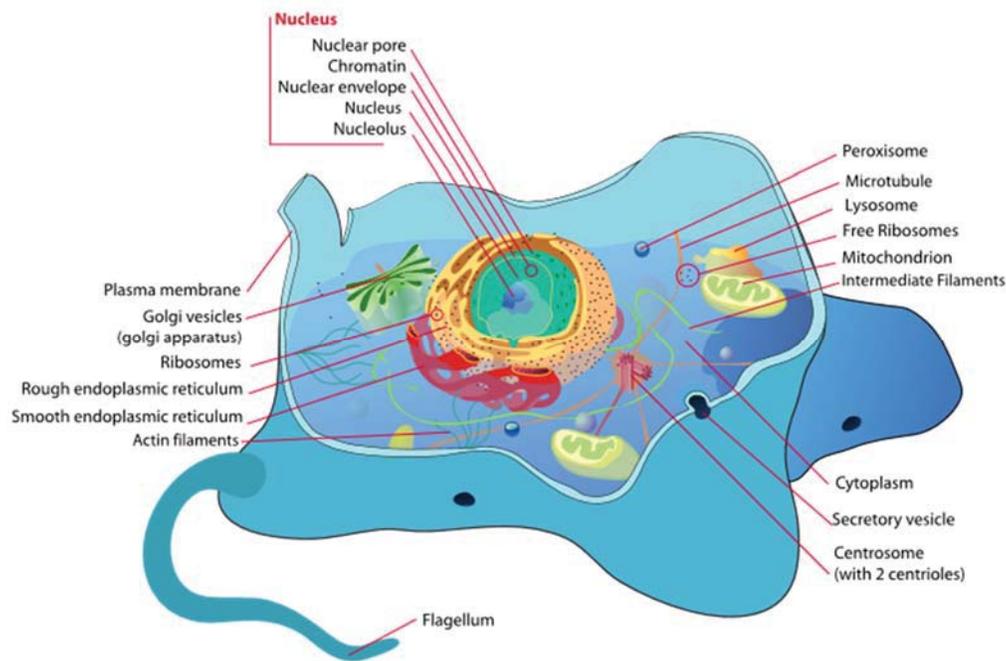


The Cells That Make Us

By ReadWorks



“Mom, I’m hurt,” said Mike.

“What happened?” asked Mike’s mom.

“I stumbled and fell while playing football at the playground today. I scraped my knee,” said Mike.

“You poor dear. Here, let’s put a Band-Aid on your knee,” said his mom.

Mike’s mom gingerly wiped his bleeding knee with a wet cloth and pasted a Band-Aid on it. Mike wondered aloud, “Our bodies are made of arms and legs. The arms and legs are made of blood and bones. But what are these blood and bones made of?”

Mike’s mom replied, “Everything in our body is made of small units called cells. Think of it this way. Just like hundreds of thousands of bricks form a house, millions of cells form our blood, muscles, bones, skin, and hair—eventually coming together to form the human body.”

As Mike looked at his bandaged knee, he wondered, “Wow, can I see these cells?”

“You cannot see your cells directly,” said his mom. “A cell is tiny and is as small as the bacteria and other microorganisms that we cannot see with our naked eye. A cell is the smallest unit that can be said to be alive. You can see a cell if you have a powerful enough microscope, just like you’d see bacteria or microbes under a microscope.”

“So, every part of my body consists of cells?” Mike said.

“Yeah. Not just your body, mine too,” said Mike’s mom. “Your pet dog, Tommy? He’s made of cells. Your friend Jim’s cat? She’s made of cells, too. The lions we saw on safari last year, the spiders in our storeroom. Every creature on earth is made of tiny cells, just like you and me.”

“Wow, so an ant or an amoeba is built up of cells, like so many Lego blocks?”

“Yes, just like Lego blocks. Only some creatures have just a single cell, like an amoeba. They are called unicellular organisms. Others, like us human beings, are collections of cells. These are called multicellular organisms. Multicellular organisms can range in size from brown algae to large animals like elephants, whales, and giraffes, which have trillions of cells.”

“But what does a cell look like?”

“A cell is tiny, of course. But if you did manage to peer into a cell with a microscope that was powerful enough, you could see that a cell consists of different parts, too.”

“So what parts are these?”

“Just like parts of our body are responsible for different activities (legs for movement, stomach for digestion, eyes for seeing, etc.), different parts within cells are responsible for different functions. These different parts perform the activities that keep the cell alive.”

“Wow, so how does this teeny weeny cell stay alive?”

“The different parts of the cell work together to keep the cell alive. The nucleus is the ‘brain’ of the cell. It controls and coordinates all activities of the cell. The nucleus is surrounded by the nuclear membrane, which is like a blanket that protects the nucleus. The cell membrane is the outer covering of the cell, much like the nuclear membrane is the covering of the nucleus. The cell membrane is like a tap which controls what enters and leaves the cell. It can allow certain substances (food and water) to enter the cell, and block out other substances (waste or poisonous substances).”

“So the cell membrane is like a sieve that lets in some things and blocks other things?”

“Yeah. Or like an electric switch, if you think of it that way. Then there is the cytoplasm, which is a jellylike fluid that fills the cell, much like blood fills our body.”

“Or like air fills the atmosphere around us?”

“Exactly! Only, all of this is within the tiny cell you can only see with the help of a microscope.”

“Wow. This is like a tiny machine!”

“Yeah. But that’s not all. All plant, fungal and some animal cells also have vacuoles, which is a cavity that works like a storage container.”

“And what goes inside it?”

“It depends. Mostly, vacuoles are used to isolate harmful and waste material from the rest of the cell and help get rid of it.”

“And what else?”

“Water; in plants, vacuoles help maintain the right water pressure. Animal cell vacuoles also help to store fats, starches, and glycogen which are all energy products.”

“Is energy produced inside the vacuoles too?”

“No. Energy production happens in a part of the cell called the mitochondrion. These mitochondria are shaped like kidney beans. They convert food into chemical energy for the cells.”

“And all the millions of cells keep me alive.”

“Absolutely. With the accumulated energy in every one of the millions of cells, you and I get the strength to move our arms and legs, to think, move about, and to live.”

“Wow. But each cell is tiny, so each cell would produce only a tiny amount of energy.”

“Yeah. So these cells have to work together. A group of cells band together and form a tissue. There are many types of tissues. For example, connective tissues include blood or bones. These form connections between parts of the body. Muscle tissues form muscles, which help us move. Nervous tissues help parts of our body transmit messages—or ‘think’ and react to things that happen around us. Epithelial tissues are outer tissues that form protective layers.”

“Like, skin?”

“Exactly! These tissues are specialized for different functions, so they work together in unison. For instance, all the cells in the muscle tissue in your calf muscles work together so that you can walk or run.”

“...and the tissues in my biceps help me wave my hand,” said Mike, waving his hand from side to side.

“That’s not all,” said Mike’s mom. “Often, tissues cannot function or operate by themselves. So, these tissues team up to form organs.”

“Just like me and my friends together form a football team,” said Mike, reminded of his scraped knee.

“Yeah, just like you can’t play football by yourself, a tissue cannot do anything by itself. It teams up with other tissues, and together, they perform the body’s activities. So, a group of tissues team up to form your nose and help you smell. Other tissues in your pancreas help you digest food. So, each organ performs its specific function because of the tissues that constitute it.”

“And the tissues, of course, are formed by the teeny weeny cells. Wow, so even if a cell by itself cannot smell anything, or a tissue by itself cannot smell anything, a collection of tissues can actually smell? That is so cool!”

“Unless you’re a unicellular organism, one cell can’t do much on its own. But in unity, there is strength. When millions of cells work together, magic happens. When cells combine to become tissues and tissues combine to become organs, the organs can perform the everyday activities like digestion, breathing, smell, taste—and just about everything else you do.”

“Wow, all because of a teeny weeny cell! That is truly magical.”