CORPUS LUTEUM

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November 10, 2025

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Biology, Physiology, Endocrinology

1. Core Definition

The **corpus luteum** (Latin for "yellow body") is a highly specialized, temporary endocrine structure that forms within the ovary immediately following ovulation. Its formation is contingent upon the successful rupture of the dominant Graafian follicle and the subsequent release of the ovum. This glandular mass derives its characteristic yellow coloration from accumulated carotenoids and lipids, particularly cholesterol, which are essential precursors for steroid hormone synthesis. The corpus luteum represents the culmination of complex follicular development and serves a pivotal function in preparing the female reproductive tract for potential pregnancy.

Unlike permanent endocrine organs, the corpus luteum is transient, its existence and function strictly timed by the hormonal demands of the menstrual or estrous cycle. Functionally, it is the primary physiological source of steroid hormones during the second half, or **luteal phase**, of the cycle. Its primary role is to ensure the sustained production of **progesterone**, a hormone critical for initiating and maintaining the receptive state of the uterine lining, known as the endometrium.

The temporary existence of the corpus luteum underscores the cyclical nature of female fertility. Its robust growth and subsequent demise (unless pregnancy intervenes) are precisely regulated by hormonal feedback loops originating in the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal (HPG) axis. Its structural integrity and secretory capacity are maintained through specific trophic hormones, linking the events of ovulation directly to the preparation of the uterine environment, thus bridging the gap between oocyte release and potential embryonic implantation.

2. Formation and Hormonal Regulation

The transformation of the ruptured follicle into the corpus luteum is termed **luteinization**, a process initiated by the mid-cycle surge of Luteinizing Hormone (LH). Following the expulsion of the egg during ovulation, the remaining follicular components--specifically the granulosa cells and theca cells--undergo profound morphological and biochemical changes. These cells rapidly proliferate, fold inward, and accumulate lipids, transitioning into large and small luteal cells, respectively. This cellular reorganization facilitates increased vascularization, transforming the relatively avascular follicle wall into a highly perfused, steroid-producing gland.

The primary stimulus driving both the initiation and the ongoing function of the corpus luteum is **Luteinizing Hormone (LH)**, which is excreted by the anterior pituitary gland. The LH surge is responsible for triggering the final maturation and rupture of the follicle; however, continuous, albeit lower, levels of LH are necessary during the early luteal phase to sustain the structure's endocrine

activity. LH binds to receptors on the luteal cells, promoting the uptake of cholesterol and activating the enzymatic pathways required for the conversion of cholesterol into progesterone.

Crucially, the regulation of the corpus luteum is a dynamic feedback system. While LH is the primary trophic factor, the increasing levels of progesterone secreted by the corpus luteum exert a negative feedback effect on the pituitary gland, suppressing further production of LH and Follicle-Stimulating Hormone (FSH). This hormonal braking mechanism ensures that no new follicles begin to mature while the reproductive system is actively supporting a potential pregnancy, thereby preventing concurrent ovulation within the same cycle.

3. Key Endocrine Functions

The corpus luteum functions as a highly active **temporary endocrine gland**, making it one of the most metabolically active tissues in the body during the luteal phase. Its hallmark function is the massive secretion of **progesterone**. Progesterone production rises sharply post-ovulation, peaking approximately five to seven days into the luteal phase, corresponding precisely to the optimal window for embryonic implantation.

The physiological impact of this progesterone secretion is multifaceted and essential for reproduction. In the uterus, progesterone acts on the endometrium, transforming it from a proliferative state (driven by estrogen) into a **secretory state**. This involves increasing blood supply, promoting glandular secretion of nutrients (like glycogen), and thickening the tissue, thereby creating a highly hospitable and supportive environment for a fertilized ovum. Simultaneously, progesterone affects the cervix, causing the cervical mucus to thicken and become impermeable to sperm and bacteria, safeguarding the upper reproductive tract.

In addition to progesterone, the corpus luteum also secretes moderate amounts of **estradiol** and **inhibin A**. Estradiol works synergistically with progesterone to enhance endometrial thickening and vascularization. Inhibin A plays a specific regulatory role; it selectively inhibits FSH release from the pituitary. This combined hormonal output ensures the maintenance of a stable hormonal milieu conducive to successful gestation while temporarily suspending the ovarian cycle.

4. Fate and Life Cycle

The existence of the corpus luteum follows one of two distinct trajectories, dictated entirely by whether or not fertilization of the ovum occurs. This duality defines the hormonal transition between the menstrual cycles.

In the absence of fertilization, the intrinsic lifespan of the corpus luteum is genetically programmed and typically lasts 10 to 14 days. If the egg is not fertilized by sperm and implantation does not occur, the structure begins a process of programmed functional and structural degeneration known

as **luteolysis**. Luteolysis is characterized by the cessation of steroid hormone production, leading to a dramatic drop in circulating levels of progesterone and estrogen. This sudden hormonal withdrawal destabilizes the highly prepared endometrium, triggering the shedding of the uterine lining, which results in menstruation (the onset of the next cycle). The degenerated corpus luteum is eventually replaced by scar tissue, a white fibrous structure called the **corpus albicans**.

Conversely, if fertilization and subsequent implantation are successful, the developing embryo begins secreting **Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG)**. This hormone, structurally and functionally analogous to LH, acts as the crucial rescue signal. HCG binds to the LH receptors on the corpus luteum, preventing its regression (luteolysis) and stimulating it to continue secreting massive amounts of progesterone. This "corpus luteum of pregnancy" is vital for the first 7 to 9 weeks of gestation, providing the necessary hormonal support to maintain the pregnancy until the placenta develops sufficiently to take over progesterone production entirely, at which point the corpus luteum gradually regresses.

5. Clinical Significance

The functional health of the corpus luteum is critical for reproductive success, making its evaluation essential in the context of infertility and recurrent miscarriage. A condition known as **luteal phase defect (LPD)** is diagnosed when the corpus luteum produces insufficient progesterone or if its lifespan is abnormally short. LPD can lead to an underdeveloped secretory endometrium that is incapable of supporting implantation or maintaining a viable early pregnancy, often resulting in early pregnancy loss.

Furthermore, the corpus luteum is the source of **functional ovarian cysts**. A corpus luteum cyst develops when the structure fails to regress normally after the luteal phase, or if the cavity seals after ovulation and fills with fluid or blood. These cysts are extremely common, usually benign, and typically resolve spontaneously without intervention. However, in rare instances, they can grow large enough to cause pelvic pain or rupture, leading to acute abdominal distress requiring medical attention.

Due to its established importance, ensuring adequate corpus luteum function is a cornerstone of assisted reproductive technologies (ART), such as in vitro fertilization (IVF). During IVF cycles, the follicular stimulation protocols often suppress the natural function of the corpus luteum. Consequently, **luteal phase support** (LPS), usually involving the administration of exogenous progesterone, is routinely provided to supplement or replace the corpus luteum's production, thereby maximizing the chances of successful embryo implantation and sustaining the early stages of pregnancy.

Further Reading

Corpus Luteum (Wikipedia)
Graafian Follicle (Wikipedia)
Luteinizing Hormone (Wikipedia)
Endometrium (Wikipedia)
Menstruation (Wikipedia)
Anterior Pituitary (Wikipedia)