

PARAHIPPOCAMPAL GYRUS

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October 30, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *PARAHIPPOCAMPAL GYRUS*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=64104>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Neuroscience, Cognitive Psychology, Neuroanatomy

1. Core Definition

The Parahippocampal Gyrus (PHG), often referred to clinically as the **parahippocampal cortex**, constitutes a vital cortical region situated on the medial aspect of the brain's temporal lobe. Anatomically, it is structured as a ridge or convolution that lies immediately superior to the hippocampus, serving as a critical component of the limbic system. This region is fundamentally involved in higher-order cognitive processes, most prominently associated with the formation, storage, and retrieval of specific types of memory, particularly those related to spatial navigation and context.

In essence, the PHG functions as a crucial interface, linking information processing within the neocortex--specifically sensory association areas--to the dedicated memory processing circuits of the hippocampal formation. It facilitates the conversion of perceptual input into durable memories, acting as a gateway that filters and organizes data before deep encoding occurs. Its designation as a gyrus reflects its macroscopic structure as a prominent fold in the cerebral cortex, distinguishing it structurally from adjacent, flatter cortical areas.

The functional integrity of the PHG is indispensable for what is known as **topographic memory**--the ability to recall spatial layouts, routes, and environmental scenes. Damage or dysfunction in this area often results in profound deficits in wayfinding and the ability to recognize locations, underscoring its pivotal role not just in abstract memory formation, but in the practical application of spatial knowledge necessary for daily life and orientation within an environment.

2. Anatomical Location and Structure

The Parahippocampal Gyrus spans the medial surface of the temporal lobe, bordered anteriorly by the uncus and laterally by the collateral sulcus. It is a highly stratified area of the cerebral cortex, comprised of multiple cytoarchitectonic fields, which collectively contribute to its complex processing capabilities. The gyrus encompasses the entorhinal cortex (Brodmann area 28) and the perirhinal cortex (Brodmann areas 35 and 36), though the term PHG often refers specifically to the posterior portion known as the parahippocampal area proper, distinct from these anterior fields.

The strategic location of the gyrus means it receives extensive afferent input from numerous cortical areas, including the parietal, occipital, and temporal association cortices, which provide multimodal sensory information. These inputs converge on the PHG, allowing it to integrate details about 'what' (object recognition from the temporal cortex) and 'where' (spatial location from the parietal cortex). This integration is physically realized by its dense projection pathways, specifically

the perforant pathway, which delivers processed information directly into the dentate gyrus and subsequently the hippocampus.

Structurally, the PHG is a six-layered neocortical structure, though variations exist in the transition zones (such as the entorhinal area, which is typically five-layered). The precise cytoarchitecture dictates its role as a high-level processing unit, enabling sophisticated pattern separation and completion mechanisms crucial for distinguishing between similar spatial environments or contexts. Its intimate anatomical connection with the underlying hippocampal formation ensures that the spatial and contextual information it processes is rapidly transferred for long-term consolidation.

3. Functional Roles in Spatial and Topographic Memory

The primary established function of the Parahippocampal Gyrus is its essential involvement in **spatial memory** and navigation. Research, particularly involving functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies in humans and lesion studies in animal models, consistently demonstrates PHG activation when individuals are required to encode or retrieve memories of places, scenes, or environmental layouts. It is often referred to as the brain's 'scene processor,' dedicated to understanding the context of an environment rather than just the objects within it.

A key aspect of PHG function is its role in processing visual environmental landmarks and scene recognition, a function attributed largely to the posterior parahippocampal cortex (PPHC), sometimes termed the Parahippocampal Place Area (PPA). The PPA responds selectively and robustly to images of landscapes, buildings, and rooms, but minimally to isolated objects or faces. This specialization suggests that the PHG is crucial for creating a holistic, contextual representation of a place, which is fundamentally different from object recognition handled by the adjacent perirhinal cortex.

Furthermore, the PHG acts in concert with other brain regions, such as the retrosplenial cortex and the presubiculum, to maintain a cognitive map. This network is instrumental in performing tasks that require calculating one's position relative to landmarks (allothetic navigation) or planning complex routes. The integrity of these connections ensures that environmental knowledge is flexible, allowing for successful orientation even when starting from novel vantage points, highlighting the PHG's fundamental contribution to navigating the physical world.

4. Role in the Medial Temporal Lobe Memory System

The Parahippocampal Gyrus is central to the broader **Medial Temporal Lobe (MTL) memory system**, which is universally recognized as the foundation for declarative memory--the memory of facts and events. Within this system, the PHG (alongside the entorhinal and perirhinal cortices) constitutes the primary afferent input pathway to the hippocampus. This means that nearly all information destined for long-term storage within the hippocampus must first be processed and

relayed through the PHG.

The PHG specifically handles contextual information, integrating spatial (where and when) data with item-specific (what) data processed by the perirhinal cortex. This separation and subsequent integration are critical for episodic memory--the ability to recall specific events embedded in a temporal and spatial context. If the PHG is damaged, an individual might remember that an object exists (semantic memory, potentially handled by perirhinal cortex), but fail to recall where or when they encountered it (episodic detail, dependent on PHG input).

The outflow from the PHG is equally crucial, as it participates in the consolidation loop. Once the hippocampus processes and temporarily stores the memory trace, the information is sent back to the neocortex, often via the PHG, for permanent storage. This recurrent loop supports the hypothesis that the MTL system is essential for memory formation but that over time, memories become independent of the hippocampus and are stored in diffuse cortical networks, a process heavily mediated by the functional connectivity of the parahippocampal region.

5. Associated Clinical Conditions and Pathology

Given its critical role in memory consolidation and spatial awareness, the Parahippocampal Gyrus is frequently implicated in various neurological and psychiatric disorders. Perhaps the most studied association is its involvement in **Alzheimer's disease (AD)**. The PHG and the adjacent entorhinal cortex are among the first regions of the brain to show pathology, specifically the accumulation of neurofibrillary tangles composed of hyperphosphorylated tau protein. This early degeneration contributes significantly to the initial symptoms of AD, which often manifest as difficulty with spatial orientation and the encoding of new episodic memories.

Furthermore, structural abnormalities in the PHG have been consistently reported in patients suffering from **schizophrenia**. Studies utilizing volumetric MRI often reveal reduced gray matter volume in the parahippocampal area, particularly on the left side. These structural changes are hypothesized to contribute to the cognitive deficits characteristic of the disorder, including impaired contextual processing, difficulties in filtering irrelevant information, and disturbances in working memory that require spatial context.

The PHG also plays a role in certain forms of epilepsy, particularly temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). Seizure foci often originate within the medial temporal structures, and pathological changes such as hippocampal sclerosis frequently extend into the PHG. The resultant neural hyperactivity and subsequent tissue damage can lead to profound interictal memory deficits, further cementing the region's importance as a primary substrate for complex mnemonic functions.

6. Nomenclature and Relationship to Parahippocampal Cortex

While the term **Parahippocampal Gyrus** refers strictly to the macroscopic ridge or anatomical fold, **Parahippocampal Cortex** is often used synonymously in cognitive neuroscience literature, especially when referring to its functional properties. However, precise neuroanatomical classification typically divides the gyrus into distinct cortical areas, each with unique cytoarchitecture and functional specializations.

The gyrus encompasses three primary functional zones along its anterior-posterior axis: the perirhinal cortex (PRC, associated with object recognition and familiarity), the entorhinal cortex (EC, the primary gateway to the hippocampus), and the posterior parahippocampal cortex (PPHC, specialized for scene and spatial context). The usage of "Parahippocampal Gyrus" as a blanket term reflects the historical understanding of the region as a unified structure, but contemporary research demands a finer distinction between these constituent cortices.

Understanding this nomenclature is crucial for interpreting research findings. For instance, studies identifying the Parahippocampal Place Area (PPA) are referring to a functional region within the posterior extent of the gyrus, whereas studies on the early pathology of Alzheimer's disease typically focus on the entorhinal component. Thus, while the gyrus provides the overall anatomical framework, the underlying cortical subdivisions drive the specific computational differences observed across the MTL.

7. Debates and Current Research

Despite the established understanding of the PHG's role in spatial memory, current research focuses intensely on refining its non-spatial functions and its interactions within wider brain networks. One significant debate revolves around the PHG's involvement in emotional processing. Due to its proximity and reciprocal connections with the amygdala, the PHG is hypothesized to play a role in encoding the contextual environment in which emotional events occur, thereby contributing to the powerful and detailed recall of emotionally charged memories.

Another area of active inquiry is the differentiation of functions between the PRC, EC, and PPHC regarding episodic memory. While the PPHC is scene-selective, recent studies suggest it may also contribute to non-spatial forms of context, such as temporal sequencing or abstract conceptual relationships, challenging the strict spatial-only categorization. Researchers are employing high-resolution fMRI and magnetoencephalography (MEG) to track the temporal flow of information, distinguishing when the PHG is acting as a relay station versus when it is performing intrinsic computation.

Furthermore, computational neuroscience is utilizing the known anatomical circuits of the PHG to develop sophisticated models of memory encoding and retrieval. These models test hypotheses

regarding how pattern separation--the ability to keep similar memories distinct--is achieved through the transformation of sensory input as it passes through the PHG into the hippocampus. These investigations are vital for designing therapeutic interventions for disorders where memory separation is impaired, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or early dementia.

8. Further Reading

[Parahippocampal Gyrus \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Parahippocampal Cortex in Memory and Navigation \(ScienceDirect\)](#)

[The Medial Temporal Lobe and Recognition Memory \(National Institutes of Health\)](#)

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