

SECTION

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SECTION

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Histology, Pathology, Medical Imaging (Radiology)

1. Core Definition

The term **section** refers broadly to a distinct part, division, or segment of a whole. However, within the scientific and medical disciplines, it carries two critical, yet distinct, technical meanings. Primarily, a section denotes a thin, prepared slice of tissue, cells, microorganisms, or other biological material that is rendered suitable for detailed visual investigation, typically using a microscope. This preparation is fundamental to fields such as pathology and histology, allowing for the examination of cellular architecture and disease states. A classic example of this usage is the preparation of a section of a tumor for microscopic evaluation.

Secondly, especially in modern diagnostics and medical imaging, **section** refers to a digital image or visualization representing a specific plane--often a **cross-section**--of a body part or internal structure. These images are non-invasive and are generated through advanced technological modalities, including **Computed Tomography** (CT) and **Magnetic Resonance Imaging** (MRI). In this context, the section is not a physical slice but a reconstructed image plane that provides essential diagnostic information about internal anatomy and pathology.

2. Context in Histopathology and Biology

In **histopathology**, which is the microscopic examination of biological tissues to observe manifestations of disease, the quality and integrity of the tissue section are paramount. The process of creating a viable section is highly standardized and involves several labor-intensive steps, ensuring that the cellular morphology remains preserved despite the harsh chemical fixation and embedding processes. The thickness of these sections is meticulously controlled, often measured in micrometers (μm), because the optical clarity and resolution under a high-powered microscope are directly dependent on minimizing the amount of material the light must pass through.

These biological sections allow pathologists to achieve critical diagnostic endpoints. By analyzing the organization of cells, the presence of abnormal growths (such as malignant cells), and the reaction of the surrounding tissue, comprehensive diagnoses can be made. The section acts as a permanent record of the state of the tissue at the time of biopsy or surgery. Furthermore, sections can be subjected to various specialized staining techniques, such as Hematoxylin and Eosin (H&E) staining, which differentially color cellular components, making nuclear details and cytoplasmic features easily distinguishable.

The term **cross section** is frequently used synonymously with section in biology when the slice is

cut perpendicularly to the long axis of the structure (e.g., a blood vessel or muscle fiber), providing an optimal view of the internal arrangement of the components.

3. Context in Medical Imaging (Radiology)

In the field of medical imaging, specifically **radiology**, the concept of a section is transformed from a physical preparation into a digital representation of a two-dimensional plane. Modern imaging technologies, particularly CT and MRI, utilize complex mathematical algorithms and energy sources (X-rays or magnetic fields) to reconstruct images slice-by-slice. Each slice, or section, provides a detailed, non-superimposed view of internal anatomical structures, which is impossible to achieve with traditional two-dimensional radiography.

The ability to visualize the body in axial (transverse), coronal (front-to-back), or sagittal (side-to-side) sections allows clinicians to precisely locate and characterize pathology, such as tumors, abscesses, or vascular anomalies. This sectional imaging capability has revolutionized diagnostic medicine, offering superior specificity and sensitivity compared to older methods. The precision inherent in these sections is crucial for staging diseases, planning surgical interventions, and guiding biopsies.

4. Preparation Methods (Histology)

The preparation of a high-quality biological section typically involves a rigorous sequence of laboratory steps. Initially, the tissue sample is fixed, usually using formalin, to halt decay and stabilize the cellular components. Following fixation, the tissue is dehydrated by gradually replacing water with alcohol, and then cleared using a solvent like xylene. The crucial next step is **embedding**, where the tissue is infiltrated with and solidified within a supportive medium, most commonly molten paraffin wax, creating a solid block.

The solid block is then placed into an instrument called a microtome. The microtome operates with extreme precision, using a sharp blade to shave off slices of tissue that are typically between 3 and 10 micrometers thick. These incredibly thin sections are then floated onto a warm water bath to smooth out wrinkles before being mounted onto a glass slide. The final step involves staining the section to enhance contrast and reveal specific cellular details that would otherwise be invisible under bright-field illumination.

5. Key Characteristics of Sections

Whether physical or digital, sections possess specific characteristics that define their utility in analysis:

Dimensionality: Physical sections are inherently thin, providing a two-dimensional view of a three-

dimensional structure. Imaging sections are digital reconstructions representing a specific plane of visualization (e.g., axial).

Uniform Thickness: In histology, thickness must be uniform (measured in μm) to ensure consistent light penetration and accurate comparison between samples.

Resolution: The level of detail visible in the section (cellular features in histology; anatomical detail in radiology) dictates its diagnostic value.

Orientation: Sections are defined by the angle at which they are cut relative to the specimen (longitudinal, transverse/cross-sectional, oblique). Proper orientation is necessary for interpreting anatomical relationships correctly.

6. Significance and Impact

The methodology surrounding the creation and interpretation of sections is foundational to modern medicine and biological research. In clinical practice, the histopathological section remains the gold standard for diagnosing most forms of cancer and inflammatory diseases. By examining the section, clinicians can determine malignancy, assess the margin status of excised tumors, and predict disease prognosis, directly influencing patient treatment protocols.

Similarly, sectional imaging techniques have transformed non-invasive diagnosis, allowing for comprehensive internal examination without surgery. The ability of modalities like MRI and CT to generate high-resolution, multi-planar sections permits early detection of disease and highly accurate pre-surgical planning. Thus, the concept of the section--whether tangible tissue or digital image--serves as a crucial interface between gross anatomy and microscopic pathology, enabling high-level diagnostics.

7. Further Reading

[Histology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Pathology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Medical Imaging \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Microtome \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Hematoxylin and eosin staining \(Wikipedia\)](#)