Ureters

Authored by
mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition

The ureters are paired, tubular ducts forming a crucial component of the human urinary system. Their primary function is the active transport of urine, synthesized by the kidneys, down to the urinary bladder for storage and eventual elimination. These ducts act as conduits, ensuring unidirectional flow, preventing backflow that could lead to renal damage or infection. Extending approximately 25 to 30 centimeters (10 to 12 inches) in length in the average adult, the ureters commence at the renal pelvis, exit the kidney's hilum, and traverse the abdominal and pelvic cavities before inserting obliquely into the posterior wall of the bladder.

The course of each ureter is anatomically complex, necessitating passage through specific regions of the body cavity. The superior half of the ureters is situated within the **abdomen**, running retroperitoneally along the psoas major muscle, a relationship vital for surgical planning and anatomical reference. As they descend, they pass over the iliac vessels, marking the transition point into the pelvic cavity. The inferior, or pelvic, half courses along the lateral pelvic walls, eventually turning medially to pierce the bladder wall at the ureterovesical junction (UVJ).

Functionally, the ureter is far more than a simple passive tube. It possesses thick, muscular walls composed predominantly of smooth muscle fibers, which are responsible for generating the contractile waves necessary to propel urine against gravity, pressure gradients, or through constricted areas. This active, rhythmic propulsion mechanism--known as **peristalsis**--is fundamental to maintaining efficient drainage of the upper urinary tract and protecting the renal parenchyma from hydrostatic pressure buildup.

2. Anatomy and Histology

The ureteral wall is structured into three distinct layers, each contributing to its structural integrity and physiological capacity. The innermost layer is the mucosa, lined by transitional epithelium, often referred to as urothelium. This specialized epithelium is highly elastic and impermeable to water and solutes, allowing the ureter to stretch significantly as it conducts urine while protecting the underlying tissues from the corrosive nature of the fluid. The urothelium rests upon a thin lamina propria consisting of connective tissue, small vessels, and nerves.

The middle layer, the muscularis, provides the mechanical force for urine transport. This layer is primarily composed of two distinct smooth muscle coats: an inner longitudinal layer and an outer circular layer. In the distal third of the ureter, near the bladder, a third layer of muscle, an external longitudinal coat, often appears, strengthening the terminal segment. It is the synchronized,

sequential contraction of these smooth muscle bundles that generates the peristaltic waves, typically occurring every 10 to 30 seconds, ensuring that urine is delivered to the bladder in small boluses.

The outermost layer is the adventitia, a fibrous connective tissue sheath that anchors the ureter to surrounding retroperitoneal structures. This layer contains the ureter's main blood vessels, lymphatic ducts, and nerves. Anatomically, the ureters exhibit three natural points of narrowing, or constrictions, which are clinically significant as they are common sites for the impaction of urinary calculi (kidney stones). These constrictions occur at: 1) the **ureteropelvic junction (UPJ)**, where the ureter leaves the renal pelvis; 2) where the ureter crosses the pelvic brim over the iliac vessels; and 3) the ureterovesical junction (UVJ), where it enters the bladder wall.

3. Physiological Function: Peristalsis and the UVJ

The process of peristalsis is the key physiological mechanism of the ureters. Once urine accumulates in the renal pelvis to a critical volume, pacemaker cells located within the calyces or the UPJ initiate an electrical impulse. This impulse propagates distally, triggering the sequential contraction of the smooth muscle layers. This wave-like motion effectively 'milks' the urine bolus down the tube toward the bladder, independent of gravitational forces or posture. The frequency and strength of these contractions are regulated primarily by the volume of urine entering the ureter, though they can be modulated by autonomic nervous system input.

Crucial to the efficiency of the urinary system is the prevention of urine reflux--the backflow of urine from the high-pressure bladder back into the low-pressure ureters and kidneys. This prevention is achieved by the specialized anatomy of the **ureterovesical junction (UVJ)**, which acts as a physiological valve. As the ureter enters the bladder, it passes obliquely through the bladder wall for several centimeters before opening into the bladder lumen. This intramural segment is protected by the surrounding detrusor muscle of the bladder.

When the bladder fills and its internal pressure rises during the storage phase or during micturition (urination), the pressure compresses the intramural segment of the ureter against the rigid surrounding tissues. This compression effectively closes the ureteral lumen, preventing retrograde flow. Failure of this valve mechanism results in vesicoureteral reflux (VUR), a condition discussed later, which is a major contributor to recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs) and potential long-term kidney damage.

4. Innervation and Blood Supply

The complex and lengthy path of the ureters necessitates a segmental and redundant blood supply. The arterial supply is typically derived from three major sources corresponding to the ureteral segments. The superior (abdominal) segment receives branches directly from the **renal**

artery, which supplies the proximal portion. The middle segment is supplied by branches from the gonadal arteries (testicular or ovarian) and common iliac arteries. The inferior (pelvic) segment receives blood from branches of the internal iliac artery, including the superior and inferior vesical arteries and, in females, sometimes the uterine or vaginal arteries.

This rich, overlapping collateral circulation is essential for maintaining viability, particularly during surgical manipulation. However, due to this segmental supply, great care must be taken during mobilization of the ureter, as extensive stripping of the adventitia can compromise blood flow, leading to ischemic injury or stricture formation. Venous drainage generally parallels the arterial supply, with veins emptying into the renal, gonadal, and internal iliac venous systems.

Innervation is provided by the autonomic nervous system, primarily through the renal, aortic, and superior and inferior hypogastric plexuses. The ureters receive both sympathetic and parasympathetic input. **Sympathetic fibers** (originating from T10-L1/L2 spinal segments) are mainly vasoconstrictive and convey pain sensation. Pain signals resulting from obstruction (such as a stone) are typically referred along the dermatomes corresponding to these sympathetic segments, manifesting as classic loin-to-groin pain. **Parasympathetic fibers**, primarily derived from the vagus nerve and sacral outflow, are thought to primarily modulate peristaltic rate and smooth muscle tone, though the ureters exhibit inherent contractility independent of central nervous system control.

5. Clinical Significance: Common Pathologies

The most prevalent and acute pathology involving the ureters is **urolithiasis**, the presence of urinary calculi (kidney stones). As stones pass from the renal pelvis, they often become lodged at one of the three anatomical constrictions, most commonly the UVJ. Obstruction causes intense renal colic due to the buildup of pressure within the renal collecting system and the vigorous, yet futile, peristaltic contractions attempting to dislodge the stone. Prolonged or severe obstruction can lead to hydronephrosis--the swelling of the kidney due to accumulated urine--and ultimately, loss of renal function.

Another critical condition is **vesicoureteral reflux (VUR)**, resulting from a congenital or acquired defect in the UVJ mechanism. When the intramural segment of the ureter is too short or lacks sufficient muscular support, bladder pressure overcomes the valvular resistance, forcing urine back toward the kidney. VUR is graded based on the severity and extent of reflux and is a primary cause of pyelonephritis (kidney infection) in children, as bacteria travel easily from the bladder to the kidney, potentially causing scarring and hypertension.

Other significant ureteral pathologies include ureteral strictures (narrowing), which can be congenital, or more commonly, acquired secondary to surgical trauma, radiation, or chronic inflammation. Furthermore, tumors, primarily **urothelial carcinoma** (transitional cell carcinoma),

can arise anywhere along the lining of the urinary tract, including the ureters. These malignancies often present with painless hematuria (blood in the urine) and require specialized diagnostic and surgical intervention.

6. Diagnostic and Therapeutic Procedures

Diagnosis of ureteral pathologies relies heavily on advanced imaging techniques. **CT urography** is considered the gold standard for visualizing the entire urinary tract, providing detailed anatomical information regarding stones, tumors, and surrounding soft tissues. Intravenous pyelogram (IVP), once common, is now largely replaced by CT for acute stone diagnosis but remains useful for assessing overall function and drainage. Ultrasound is often utilized as a rapid, non-invasive method to check for hydronephrosis, indicating ureteral obstruction.

Therapeutic management often targets the alleviation of obstruction, particularly in cases of urolithiasis. Small stones may pass spontaneously with medical expulsive therapy (MET). For larger or impacted stones, minimally invasive procedures are required. **Ureteroscopy** involves inserting a thin, flexible endoscope through the urethra and bladder up into the ureter. Stones can then be fragmented using laser lithotripsy (Ho:YAG laser) and removed.

In cases of severe obstruction, stricture, or post-surgical swelling, temporary urinary diversion is often achieved by placing a **ureteral stent**--a thin, hollow tube placed internally connecting the renal pelvis to the bladder. Stents maintain patency, allowing urine to drain freely, and relieve pain and pressure. For complex strictures or high-grade VUR, reconstructive surgery, such as ureteral reimplantation or pyeloplasty, may be necessary to restore normal flow and function.

7. Embryological Development

The development of the ureters is intrinsically linked to the development of the definitive kidney (metanephros). The ureters originate as an outgrowth of the mesonephric (Wolffian) duct, specifically a structure known as the **ureteric bud**, around the fifth week of gestation. This bud grows cranially, inducing the differentiation of the metanephric blastema into the functional nephrons and collecting system of the kidney.

The ureteric bud not only forms the ureter itself but also branches repeatedly within the metanephric tissue to form the renal pelvis, major calyces, minor calyces, and the collecting ducts. Anomalies in this developmental process can result in congenital defects, the most common being **duplicated ureters**, where the ureteric bud splits prematurely, resulting in two separate ureters draining a single kidney. Duplication can be complete (two ureters opening separately into the bladder) or incomplete (the two ureters joining before reaching the bladder).

Another serious congenital defect is an **ectopic ureter**, where the ureter does not insert into the

bladder trigone but instead opens into an abnormal location, such as the urethra, vagina, or seminal vesicle. In females, this often leads to continuous, uncontrollable leakage of urine, despite normal voiding, as the abnormal opening bypasses the bladder's sphincter control mechanism. Understanding these embryological origins is crucial for diagnosing and treating complex congenital anomalies of the urinary tract.

8. Further Reading

Ureter - Wikipedia
Anatomy, Abdomen and Pelvis: Ureter - StatPearls
Understanding Kidney Stones and Ureteral Obstruction - Urology Care Foundation