

# COMPARATIVE ENDOCRINOLOGY

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A WILEY-INTERSCIENCE PUBLICATION

**JOHN WILEY & SONS**

New York · Chichester · Brisbane · Toronto · Singapore

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*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:*

Main entry under title:

Comparative endocrinology.

“A Wiley-Interscience publication.”

Includes bibliographies and index.

1. Endocrinology, Comparative. I. Gorbman, Aubrey, 1914–

QP187.C5966 1982 596'.0142 82-13455  
ISBN 0-471-06266-9

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6

We dedicate this textbook to those of our teachers, associates, and friends—pioneers in the young science of comparative endocrinology—who have died in the past 20 years. It was they who inspired our interest and fascination with this remarkable field.

A. Elizabeth Adams  
Herbert M. Evans  
Irving I. Geschwind  
Ernest Scharrer  
Philip E. Smith  
Emil Witschi

# Preface

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Comparative endocrinology, like all phases of comparative physiology, has experienced profound quantitative as well as qualitative development since *A Textbook of Comparative Endocrinology* was published nearly 20 years ago. In fact, we could not consider this book a revision of the 1963 version but rather a completely new text, retaining only a few of the original illustrations. Our basic orientation to endocrinology remains the same, however. We consider endocrine mechanisms adaptive systems that play a basic role in making each species fit into its environmental niche.

We have compromised this principle only in Chapter 13, which deals with reproduction. Most college courses in endocrinology or reproductive endocrinology focus on mammalian reproduction, for several good reasons. Mammalian and human reproduction are the most thoroughly understood of all. Endocrine mechanisms regulating reproduction in nonmammalian species are among the most specialized, most specific, and most complexly adapted; at the same time they are the least well understood. Thus we have chosen to emphasize the well-known mechanisms for reproductive regulation in mammals and man and to bring in comparative aspects secondarily.

For all other endocrine systems the comparative approach has been primary. The broad context of the basic biological principles of animal endocrine structure, function, and evolution have motivated the writing of this text. We hope that this orientation will be found as attractive in the future as it has been in the past.

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November 1982

# Contents

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1. INTRODUCTION	1
Mechanisms for Integration, 1	
<i>Homeostatic Regulation of the Level of Glucose in the Blood, 3</i>	
<i>Coordination of Gastric Function During the Digestive Process, 4</i>	
<i>Rapid Maturation of Tissues in Developing Frog Embryos, 5</i>	
Survey of the Endocrine Glands, 5	
Typical Neuroendocrine Reflexes, 7	
<i>The Suckling Response, 7</i>	
<i>The Postcopulatory Ovulation Response in the Rabbit, 9</i>	
<i>Photoperiodic Stimulation of Gonadal Development in Birds, 10</i>	
Morphology of Endocrine Tissues, 11	
The Chemical Nature of Hormones, 14	
Hormonogenesis, 21	
Hormone Transport and Distribution, 25	
Hormone Action, 28	
Endocrine Factors in Adaptation and Evolution, 32	
Historical Background, 33	
Basic Methods in Endocrinology, 35	
Additional Reading, 43	
2. MORPHOLOGY OF THE PITUITARY GLAND SYSTEM	45
General, 45	
Neurosecretory Structures of the Brain and Pituitary, 47	
Endocrine Regions of the Brain, 48	
Development of the Pituitary Gland, 51	
Comparative Anatomy of the Pituitary Gland, 58	
<i>The Agnathan Pituitary, 60</i>	

<i>The Selachian Pituitary</i> , 64	
<i>The Holocephalan Pituitary</i> , 66	
<i>The Teleostean Pituitary</i> , 69	
<i>Pituitary Glands of Intermediate Fish Groups</i> , 71	
<i>Some Speculations Concerning the Early Evolution of the Vertebrate Adenohypophysis</i> , 77	
<i>The Amphibian Pituitary</i> , 78	
<i>The Reptilian Pituitary</i> , 81	
<i>The Avian Pituitary</i> , 87	
<i>The Mammalian Pituitary</i> , 88	
Additional Reading, 92	

### 3. THE NEUROHYPOPHYSIS 95

Systemic Hormones of the Neurohypophysis, 96	
Phyletic Distribution, 97	
Production and Release of Neurohypophyseal Hormones, 102	
Actions of the Neurohypophyseal Hormones, 103	
<i>Water Balance</i> , 103	
<i>Blood Pressure Regulation</i> , 107	
<i>Contraction of the Oviduct and Uterus</i> , 110	
<i>Milk Ejection</i> , 112	
Additional Reading, 115	

### 4. THE PARS DISTALIS 117

Microscopic Structure of the Pars Distalis and the Cellular Origin of Its Hormones, 123	
Growth Hormone (STH), 125	
<i>The Hormonal Molecule</i> , 125	
<i>Actions of STH</i> , 130	
<i>Somatomedin</i> , 131	
<i>STH and Carbohydrate, Fat, and Protein Metabolism</i> , 134	
<i>Control of STH Secretion</i> , 135	
Prolactin (PRL), 136	
<i>The Prolactin Molecule</i> , 136	
<i>Biological Actions of Prolactin</i> , 137	
<i>Control of Prolactin Synthesis and Release</i> , 144	
Thyrotropic Hormone (TSH), 145	
<i>Functions of TSH</i> , 147	
<i>Regulation of TSH Secretion</i> , 148	
Gonadotropic Hormones (LH and FSH), 150	
<i>Functions of Gonadotropins</i> , 151	
<i>Control of Gonadotropin Secretion</i> , 152	

Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone (ACTH) and Related Biologically  
Active Substances, 153  
Additional Reading, 155

5. THE PARS INTERMEDIA AND PIGMENTARY CONTROL 159

Physiological Color Change, 161  
Morphological Color Change, 164  
Hormonal Control of Color Change, 167  
    *Ontogeny of Chromatophore Control in Anurans, 172*  
    *Multiple Forms of MSH, 174*  
    *Mechanisms of MSH Action, 176*  
    *Catecholamines in the Coordination of Color Change, 179*  
Extrapigmentary Actions of MSH, 180  
Additional Reading, 183

6. THE THYROID GLAND 185

Comparative Gross Anatomy, 185  
Development of the Thyroid Gland, 190  
    *Association of Thyroid and Branchiogenic Organs: An  
    Embryological Problem, 197*  
Thyroid Histology and Cytology, 205  
    *Cyclic Changes in Thyroid Morphology, 211*  
Function of the Thyroid Gland: The Metabolism of Iodine, 212  
    *Iodide Accumulation, 212*  
    *Organic Compounds of Iodine and Their Formation, 214*  
        *Historical Background, 214*  
        *Iodination of Protein, 215*  
        *Iodination of Nonthyroidal Proteins, 218*  
    *Factors Affecting the Organic Phase of Iodine Metabolism, 218*  
Thyroglobulin, 220  
Proteolysis and Dehalogenation, 221  
Comparative Aspects of Thyroxinogenesis, 222  
    *Iodine Turnover Rate, 224*  
Qualitative Aspects of the Thyroidal Cycle, 228  
Secretion and Transport of Thyroid Hormones, 230  
Beginning of Function in the Developing Thyroid Gland, 232  
Nonthyroidal Metabolism of Iodine and Hormone Formation:  
    Evolution of Thyroid Function, 236  
The Functions of the Thyroid Hormones, 240  
    *General, 240*  
    *Morphological Effects of Thyroid Hormones, 241*  
        *Metamorphosis, 241*  
        *Neoteny, 244*

<i>Metamorphosis in Nonamphibian Vertebrates</i>	245
<i>Maturational Effects of Thyroid Hormones</i>	246
<i>Thyroxine and Growth</i>	247
<i>Thyroxine and Postembryonic Differentiation</i>	249
<i>Physiological and Metabolic Functions of Thyroid Hormones</i>	257
General	257
<i>Nervous System and Neuromuscular Phenomena</i>	258
<i>Digestive Tract</i>	259
<i>Kidney, Gills, Water Distribution, and Water Excretion</i>	259
<i>Oxygen Consumption and Body-Temperature Regulation</i>	260
<i>Nitrogen Metabolism</i>	267
<i>Lipid Metabolism</i>	268
<i>Carbohydrate Metabolism</i>	268
<i>Mechanism of Action of Thyroid Hormones</i>	268
<i>Cellular Actions of Thyroid Hormones Resulting in Increased Oxygen Consumption</i>	270
<i>Thyroid Hormones and Membrane Transport of Ions</i>	273
<i>Thyroid Hormone Potentiation of Catecholamines</i>	273
<i>Actions of Thyroid Hormones on the Nucleus: Protein Synthesis and Tissue Differentiation</i>	274
Additional Reading	275

## 7. CALCIUM HOMEOSTASIS

277

General	277
Bone Structure and Physiology	279
Kidney Structure and Physiology	284
The Parathyroid Gland	286
<i>Parathyroid Hormone Structure and Biosynthesis</i>	291
<i>Regulation of Parathyroid Hormone Secretion</i>	295
<i>Physiological Effects of Parathyroid Hormone</i>	297
Bone	298
Kidney	299
Intestine	300
<i>Comparative Studies of Parathyroid Hormone Function</i>	300
Birds	300
Reptiles	301
Amphibians	302
Fishes	302
Calcitonin	304
<i>Calcitonin Structure</i>	304
<i>Control of Calcitonin Secretion</i>	307
<i>Physiological Effects of Calcitonin</i>	307
<i>Comparative Studies</i>	309
<i>Physiological Significance of Calcitonin</i>	310
Vitamin D	311
<i>Effects of Vitamin D on the Intestine</i>	313



<i>Effects of Vitamin D on Bone</i> , 313	
<i>Effects of Vitamin D on the Kidney</i> , 315	
<i>Comparative Studies</i> , 315	
Stannius Corpuscles and Hypocalcin, 318	
Summary, 318	
Additional Reading, 320	
8. GASTROINTESTINAL HORMONES	325
Gastrointestinal Endocrine Cells, 326	
Hormonal Status of Gastrointestinal Peptides, 329	
<i>Gastrin</i> , 329	
<i>Cholecystokinin</i> , 333	
<i>Secretin</i> , 336	
<i>Other Active Peptides of the Gut</i> , 336	
Brain/Gut/Skin Distribution of Peptides, 340	
Mechanisms of Action of Gastrointestinal Hormones, 341	
Comparative Aspects of Gastrointestinal Hormones, 346	
Additional Reading, 348	
9. THE ENDOCRINE PANCREAS	349
Anatomy and Cytology of the Endocrine Pancreas, 349	
Insulin, 354	
<i>Structure and Biosynthesis</i> , 354	
<i>Regulation of Insulin Secretion</i> , 357	
<i>Actions of Insulin</i> , 360	
<i>Mechanisms of Insulin Action</i> , 360	
Glucagon, 361	
<i>Structure and Biosynthesis</i> , 361	
<i>Regulation of Glucagon Secretion</i> , 361	
<i>Actions of Glucagon</i> , 362	
Somatostatin, 364	
Pancreatic Polypeptide, 364	
Diabetes Mellitus, 366	
Comparative Studies of the Endocrine Pancreas, 366	
Additional Reading, 370	
10. THE ADRENAL MEDULLA	373
Gross Comparative Anatomy, 374	
Catecholamines, 377	
<i>Adrenergic Receptors</i> , 382	

*Catecholamine Actions*, 387  
*Comparative Studies of Catecholamines*, 388  
Additional Reading, 390

## 11. STEROID HORMONES AND STEROIDOGENESIS 391

Occurrence of Steroids, 391  
Structure and Nomenclature of Steroids, 393  
    *Rules of Steroid Nomenclature*, 397  
Metabolism of Steroids, 399  
    *Cholesterol Biosynthesis and Distribution*, 400  
    *Biogenesis of Steroid Hormones*, 401  
Structure–Function Relationship of Steroids, 407  
Steroid Catabolism and Excretion, 408  
Steroid Binding in the Blood, 410  
Appendix, 411  
Additional Reading, 414

## 12. THE ADRENAL CORTEX AND INTERRENAL GLAND 415

Comparative Anatomy and Histology, 416  
Corticosteroid Hormones, 423  
    *Glucocorticoids and Mineralocorticoids*, 423  
    *Distribution of Corticosteroids*, 423  
    *Steroid Production*, 425  
Physiological Effects of Corticosteroids in Mammals, 426  
    *Metabolism*, 426  
    *Development*, 427  
    *Salt Metabolism*, 428  
    *Other Effects of Corticosteroids*, 430  
Effects of Corticosteroids in Nonmammalian Vertebrates, 431  
    *Fishes*, 431  
    *Amphibians*, 433  
    *Reptiles*, 434  
    *Birds*, 435  
Control of Adrenocortical Function, 436  
    *CRF–ACTH*, 438  
    *The Renin–Angiotensin System*, 441  
    *Comparative Aspects of the RAS*, 444  
Selye's Concept of Stress and the General Adaptation Syndrome, 446  
Additional Reading, 448

13. ENDOCRINE CONTROL OF SEXUAL REPRODUCTION	451
General Features of Sexual Reproduction, 452	
<i>The Biological Value of Sexual Reproduction and Sexual Adaptation</i> , 452	
<i>Patterns of Sexual Reproduction</i> , 453	
<i>Number of Offspring</i> , 453	
<i>Reproductive Patterns that Require Structural Adaptations</i> , 453	
Behavioral and Nervous Management of Organisms for Efficient Reproduction, 458	
The Gonads and Reproductive Structures, 459	
<i>Endocrine Factors Regulating Reproductive Cycles</i> , 459	
<i>Typical Structure of the Mammalian Ovary</i> , 461	
<i>Other Mammalian Ovaries</i> , 464	
<i>Nonmammalian Vertebrate Ovaries</i> , 469	
<i>Structure of the Male Reproductive System</i> , 476	
<i>Structures of the Testis</i> , 478	
<i>Sites of Synthesis of Androgenic Hormones</i> , 483	
Sex Hormones, 485	
<i>Testicular Hormones</i> , 485	
<i>Ovarian Hormones</i> , 486	
<i>Ovarian Inhibin</i> , 488	
<i>Relaxin</i> , 488	
<i>Steroid-Binding Proteins in the Blood and Steroid Hormone Distribution</i> , 489	
Actions of the Sex Steroid Hormones, 490	
<i>Actions of Ovarian Hormones</i> , 491	
<i>Actions at the Ovarian Level</i> , 491	
<i>Actions on the Female Duct System</i> , 492	
<i>Other Morphological Actions of Female Sex Steroids</i> , 494	
<i>Actions at the Level of the Central Nervous System: Feedback and Reproductive Behavior</i> , 497	
<i>The Female Reproductive Cycle and Its Regulation</i> , 500	
Actions of the Male Hormones, 505	
<i>Actions at the Testicular Level</i> , 505	
<i>Actions on Secondary and Accessory Male Sex Structures</i> , 507	
<i>Actions of Androgens on the Brain: Feedback and Reproductive Behavior</i> , 510	
<i>Reproductive Cycles in the Male</i> , 514	
Additional Reading, 514	
14. THE PINEAL GLAND	517
Anatomy of Development of the Epiphysis, 518	
Pineal Gland Cytology, 523	
<i>Avian Pineal Glands</i> , 524	
<i>Mammalian Pineal Glands</i> , 525	

Pineal Substances, 526	
<i>Indoleamines, 526</i>	
<i>Proteinaceous Substances, 531</i>	
Functions of Pineal Glands, 533	
<i>Color Change, 534</i>	
<i>Reproduction, 535</i>	
<i>Rhythmicity, 540</i>	
<i>Thermoregulation, 541</i>	
Melatonin Production by Extrapineal Tissue, 544	
Additional Reading, 546	

15. MULTIHORMONAL REGULATION OF PHYSIOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENTS	547
Endocrine Regulation of Intermediary Metabolism, 547	
<i>Actions of Insulin, 550</i>	
<i>Actions of Adrenaline, Noradrenaline, and Glucagon, 553</i>	
<i>Actions of Glucocorticoids, 554</i>	
<i>Actions of Growth Hormone, 555</i>	
<i>Actions of the Thyroid Hormones: <math>T_3</math> and <math>T_4</math>, 556</i>	
Calcium Regulation, 558	
Hormones in Osmoregulation, 559	
Additional Reading, 561	
INDEX	565

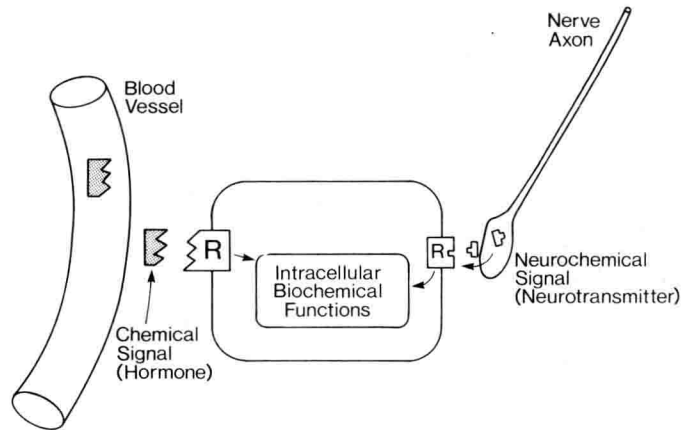
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# Introduction

## MECHANISMS FOR INTEGRATION

The animal body is, after all, a machine, a device that utilizes energy to produce or execute certain functions. It is no accident that physiologists, in speaking of these functions, refer to their “mechanisms.” In the literary sense, a machine is “an apparatus for applying mechanical power, consisting of a number of parts, each having a definite function” (*Oxford Universal Dictionary*). The parts of simpler integrated machines generally are connected levers or interlocking geared wheels, or similar contrivances to produce visible motion. In the most complex machines the separate parts are most often integrated by electrical signals that may begin in sensors of various kinds and that are led through a conduction system to appropriate responsive parts of the machine; the signals may be stored in a memory bank, and they may be integrated or modulated in various ways before utilization to provide an element of adaptiveness to the machine.

In animal organisms most of the functions of the living machine are chemical in nature, whether we are dealing with the obvious processing and metabolism of energy-yielding fuels, or the conversion of metabolites into additional organized protoplasmic constituents (growth), or the “mechanism” whereby chemically encoded genetic information is used to regulate cellular processes. This being so, it is not surprising that one of the most effective kinds of agents for integrating the widely distributed chemical functions in the complex organism is itself a chemical rather than an electrical signal. These chemical integrating substances, the focus of this book, are the *hormones*, and typically they are distributed by the blood vascular system. In fact, it is interesting that even when an electric (nervous) signal is used for integrative purposes in the organism, it is transduced into a chemical one when it reaches the target cell (Fig. 1.1).



**FIGURE 1.1.** Comparison of the ways in which hormones and nervous signals interact with target cells to produce their typical actions. Hormones are chemical molecules that are distributed at large through the blood vascular system. When the hormone diffuses out of a blood vessel it may encounter a cell that contains or bears a receptor (R) chemical molecule. The two interact and their interaction sets off a series of intracellular chemical changes that are the “response” to the hormone. Only those cells will respond that have the specific receptor, shown in this diagram by the exact complementary external shapes of the hormonal and receptor molecules. A nervous signal is an electrical one that travels on a prescribed route or “pathway.” At its end it causes the release of a chemical “transmitter” which diffuses toward and interacts with the receptor molecule at the target cell surface. The result of this interaction, as with the hormone, is to set off the intracellular chemical processes that comprise the response. The transmitter chemicals may be the same for many different kinds of cells. For nervous responses the specificity of the response depends upon the special route or pathway of the nervous signal.

The mechanism for engaging the chemical integrating signal to the responding intracellular processes involves a *receptor* molecule, whether the signal arrives via the blood or from the end of a nerve. Since hormones are distributed indiscriminately throughout the organism, wherever the blood vascular system extends, the hormone receptor is an important element in the machine because it provides *specificity* to the hormone–target cell relationship. That is, the hormones will be locked into the mechanisms of only those cells that display the receptor which, by virtue of its specific molecular shape, will interact with the hormone molecule. Receptors for neural chemical signals, like hormonal receptors, have the function of coupling the nervous signal to intracellular chemical processes. However, neurochemical receptors are relatively more common (less specific) in their tissue distribution than hormone receptors because their specificity is rendered by the special nervous pathways, as in a complex electrical circuit pattern.

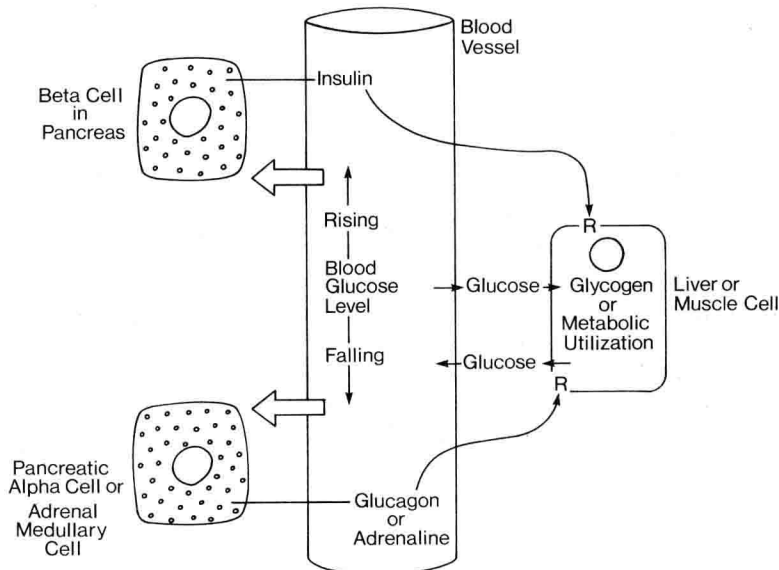
The usefulness of the concept of the organism as a machine, and the hormones as chemical messengers within it, is limited. It is obvious that the organism is different from machines as we know them, being much more complex than any machines so far devised and displaying some properties

that no nonliving machine can duplicate. It is useful at this point to better define the nature of hormonal integration, to give some actual examples of physiological processes in which hormones have their typical integrative actions.

### Homeostatic Regulation of the Level of Glucose in the Blood

The level of glucose in the blood is subject to considerable variation due to periodic sudden influxes after feeding, and more gradual effluxes due to tissue metabolism (storage in liver or muscle, or breakdown for energy). Yet, it is important that the concentration of glucose in the blood be kept within narrow limits, because the functions of some organs, as the brain, are quite sensitive to changes in glucose levels in their immediate fluid environment.

Several hormonal mechanisms are used to maintain constant blood plasma glucose levels. The insulin-secreting cells in the pancreas are directly sensitive to the plasma glucose concentration. In humans, when glucose levels rise to some value above 100 mg/100 ml, a release into the blood of the hormone insulin is evoked. Insulin is manufactured and stored in specialized (beta) cells in the pancreas (Fig. 1.2). The insulin interacts with receptors in the plasma membranes of muscle and liver cells. These receptors, when “activated” by combination with the insulin, initiate a chain of intracellular chemical processes whose net effect is the uptake of glucose from the blood



**FIGURE 1.2.** Diagrammatic representation of the mechanisms for regulating the level of blood glucose. See text for detailed explanation.

by the cells and storage of the glucose as glycogen. The consequent general result is a lowering of plasma glucose to appropriate levels that no longer provoke the beta cell to secrete insulin.

On the other hand, when plasma glucose levels fall significantly *below* the regulated level due to continued glucose utilization between meals (e.g., below 100 mg/100 ml in humans) other glucose-sensitive cells in the pancreas (the alpha cells) release glucagon, and cells in the adrenal gland release adrenaline into the blood. Receptors for these hormones may be found on the same glucose-storing cells that responded to insulin. However, the enzyme-driven chemical system with which glucagon or adrenaline are coupled leads to a release of glucose from glycogen storage. This glucose diffuses back into the blood to raise the plasma glucose level. By interplay of the glucose-lowering (hypoglycemic) and glucose-raising (hyperglycemic) hormones, the plasma glucose level is kept within well-specified limits. This is a simplified description of the blood glucose homeostatic mechanism. This mechanism will be described in greater detail in later parts of this book.

It should be mentioned that similar reciprocal mechanisms exist also for hormonal regulation of blood calcium and phosphate, as well as general ionic or specific ionic ( $K^+$ ,  $Na^+$ ) concentrations. In all of these instances the cells that secrete the regulating hormones appear to be directly sensitive to the changing blood plasma levels of the element whose concentration they regulate. The receptors for the hormones, then, are located on cells that, by their action, can appropriately correct the plasma level of the metabolite concerned.

### **Coordination of Gastric Function During the Digestive Process**

When food reaches the stomach after a meal is eaten, the previously quiescent stomach begins to secrete peptic enzyme and hydrochloric acid, and an active phase of muscular activity is triggered. The observable secretory and contractile processes are all responses to a hormone—gastrin—that is secreted by cells in the mucosal layer of the stomach when the meal enters. The gastrin secretion is stimulated by the mechanical presence of the meal in the stomach, as well as by chemical constituents in the food (secretagogues). It is not clear how the mechanical or secretagogue-initiated stimuli are communicated to the gastrin cells. In this instance a hormone messenger is secreted into the blood and is distributed throughout the organism, though its target cells are in the same organ. The target gland and smooth muscle cells of the stomach have been shown to contain gastrin receptors.

It is interesting that the ultimobranchial gland cells also display gastrin receptor activity. This gland is far removed from the stomach and secretes a hormone—calcitonin—whose function, in short, is to reduce blood calcium level. Teleologically, we may suppose that this action of gastrin is in anticipation of the rise in blood calcium that is about to occur as a result of absorption of calcium in the digested meal.



## Rapid Maturation of Tissues in Developing Frog Embryos

The metamorphosis of the aquatic tadpole into the terrestrial frog is a remarkable developmental event that appears to be under the control of the thyroid hormone. That is, tadpoles deprived of their thyroid glands fail to metamorphose for prolonged periods. However, if given synthetic thyroid hormone, they quickly resume development and metamorphosis. Although thyroid hormone receptors have been actually identified in relatively few tadpole tissues, it is fairly safe to assume that all of the many thyroid hormone-responsive tissues of the tadpole have such receptors. These tissues include skin, muscle, skeleton, the eye, the brain, the entire digestive tract, mouth parts, etc. In keeping with these facts, it has been found by use of sensitive measuring techniques that the metamorphic climax is preceded by a large surge of thyroid hormone levels in the blood of the tadpole.

How can we account for such a surge in thyroid hormone levels at the precise time when it must be coordinated with a normal developmental event? There is no complete explanation yet available, but we can assume that the hormonal surge is part of the genome-controlled sequence of changes in the developmental program of events. This program would have had to include synthesis of thyroid hormone receptor in time for all of the tadpole's tissues to become responsive to thyroid hormone. The same developmental program should dictate a later disappearance of thyroid hormone receptor in many of the same tissues, since they eventually lose their responsiveness to thyroid hormone.

## SURVEY OF THE ENDOCRINE GLANDS

Figure 1.3 represents a summary of most, but not all, vertebrate hormone-secreting tissues. These endocrines are grouped, first of all, with respect to their relationship to the hypothalamus–pituitary–target organ system. Six glandular tissues, which secrete at least ten hormones, can be identified as having no primary or direct relationship to the hypothalamus–pituitary–target organ system. They are the parathyroids, ultimobranchials, gastrointestinal tract, pancreas, liver, and adrenal medulla. It is of interest that secretion of most of the ten hormones in this group is triggered by physical (osmotic pressure or hydrostatic pressure) signals or chemical (glucose or calcium concentrations) signals from the blood itself. The exceptions are the three gastrointestinal hormones whose secretion is triggered by the contents of the gut acting upon the gut wall more or less directly.

The hypothalamus–pituitary–target organ system is large and miscellaneous, but the three anatomical elements in it have a descending hierarchical relationship to each other. That is, the hypothalamus, which is part of the brain, regulates the pituitary by direct nervous connections or by secreting neurohormones whose receptors are located in the pituitary. The pituitary