[Department of Health & Human Services](http://www.hhs.gov/)

[ational Institutes of Health (NIH) - Turning Discovery Into Health](http://www.nih.gov/)

STEM CELL INFORMATION

[**Stem cells**](javascript:glosspop('stemcells')) have the remarkable potential to develop into many different cell types in the body during early life and growth. In addition, in many tissues they serve as a sort of internal repair system, dividing essentially without limit to replenish other cells as long as the person or animal is still alive. When a stem cell divides, each new cell has the potential either to remain a stem cell or become another type of cell with a more specialized function, such as a muscle cell, a red blood cell, or a brain cell.

Stem cells are important for living organisms for many reasons. In the 3- to 5-day-old embryo, the inner stem cells give rise to the entire body of the organism, including all of the many specialized cell types and organs such as the heart, lung, skin, sperm, eggs and other tissues. In some adult tissues, such as bone marrow, muscle, and brain, discrete populations of adult stem cells generate replacements for cells that are lost through normal wear and tear, injury, or disease.

Stem cells differ from other kinds of cells in the body. All stem cells—regardless of their source—have three general properties: they are capable of dividing and renewing themselves for long periods; they are unspecialized; and they can give rise to specialized cell types.

*1. Stem cells are capable of dividing and renewing themselves for long periods*. Unlike muscle cells, blood cells, or nerve cells—which do not normally replicate themselves—stem cells may replicate many times, or [**proliferate**](javascript:glosspop('proliferation')). A starting population of stem cells that proliferates for many months in the laboratory can yield millions of cells. If the resulting cells continue to be unspecialized, like the parent stem cells, the cells are said to be capable of [**long-term self-renewal**](javascript:glosspop('ltrenewal')).

Scientists are trying to understand the properties of stem cells that relate to their [**long-term self-renewal**](javascript:glosspop('ltrenewal')). New discoveries may make it possible to understand how cell proliferation is regulated during normal embryonic development, as well as during the abnormal [**cell division**](javascript:glosspop('celldiv')) that leads to cancer. Such information would also enable scientists to grow embryonic and non-embryonic stem cells more efficiently in the laboratory.

*2. Stem cells are unspecialized.* One of the fundamental properties of a stem cell is that it does not have any tissue-specific structures that allow it to perform specialized functions. For example, a stem cell cannot work with its neighbors to pump blood through the body (like a heart muscle cell), and it cannot carry oxygen molecules through the bloodstream (like a red blood cell). However, unspecialized stem cells can give rise to specialized cells, including heart muscle cells, blood cells, or nerve cells.

*3. Stem cells can give rise to specialized cells*. When unspecialized stem cells give rise to specialized cells, the process is called [**differentiation**](javascript:glosspop('differentiation')). While differentiating, the cell usually goes through several stages, becoming more specialized at each step. Scientists are just beginning to understand the signals inside and outside cells that trigger each stem of the differentiation process. The internal [**signals**](javascript:glosspop('signals')) are controlled by a cell's [**genes**](javascript:glosspop('gene')), which are interspersed across long strands of DNA, and carry coded instructions for all cellular structures and functions. The external signals for cell differentiation include chemicals secreted by other cells, physical contact with neighboring cells, and certain molecules in the [**microenvironment**](javascript:glosspop('microenvironment')). The interaction of signals during differentiation causes the cell's DNA to acquire [**epigenetic**](javascript:glosspop('epigenetic')) marks that restrict DNA expression in the cell and can be passed on through cell division.

Given their unique regenerative abilities, stem cells offer new potentials for treating diseases such as diabetes, and heart disease. However, much work remains to be done in the laboratory and the clinic to understand how to use these cells for [**cell-based therapies**](javascript:glosspop('celltherapies')) to treat disease.

Research on [**stem cells**](javascript:glosspop('stemcells')) continues to advance knowledge about how an organism develops from a single cell and how healthy cells replace damaged cells in adult organisms. Stem cell research is one of the most fascinating areas of contemporary biology, but, as with many expanding fields of scientific inquiry, research on stem cells raises scientific questions as rapidly as it generates new discoveries.