6.3: Types of Locomotion

Learning Objectives

- Explain different types of locomotion with reference to environmental limitations and/or hard structure support for muscle function

The muscular and skeletal systems provide support to the body and allow for movement. The bones of the skeleton protect the body’s internal organs and support the weight of the body. The muscles of the muscular system contract and pull on the bones, allowing for movements as diverse as standing, walking, running, and grasping items. We will focus on the connection between human skeletal and muscular system to illustrate how these two organ systems coordinate to generate locomotion.

Human Skeletal System

The human skeleton is an endoskeleton that consists of 206 bones in the adult. An endoskeleton develops within the body rather than outside like the exoskeleton of insects. The skeleton has five main functions: providing support to the body, storing minerals and lipids, producing blood cells, protecting internal organs, and allowing for movement. The skeletal system in vertebrates is divided into the axial skeleton (which consists of the skull, vertebral column, and rib cage), and the appendicular skeleton (which consists of limb bones, the pectoral or shoulder girdle, and the pelvic girdle).
Explore the human skeleton by viewing the following video with digital 3D sculpturing.

The axial skeleton forms the central axis of the body and includes the bones of the skull, ossicles of the middle ear, hyoid bone of the throat, vertebral column, and the thoracic cage (rib cage) (Figure 6.5).
Figure 6.5. The axial skeleton, shown in blue, consists of the bones of the skull, ossicles of the middle ear, hyoid bone, vertebral column, and thoracic cage. The appendicular skeleton, shown in red, consists of the bones of the pectoral limbs, pectoral girdle, pelvic limb, and pelvic girdle. (credit: modification of work by Mariana Ruiz Villareal)

The bones of the skull support the structures of the face and protect the brain. The skull consists of cranial bones and facial bones. The cranial bones form the cranial cavity, which encloses the brain and serves as an attachment site for muscles of the head and neck. In the adult, they are tightly jointed with connective tissue and adjoining bones do not move.

The auditory ossicles of the middle ear transmit sounds from the air as vibrations to the fluid-filled cochlea. The auditory ossicles consist of two malleus (hammer) bones, two incus (anvil) bones, and two stapes (stirrups), one on each side.
Facial bones provide cavities for the sense organs (eyes, mouth, and nose), and serve as attachment points for facial muscles.

The hyoid bone lies below the mandible in the front of the neck. It acts as a movable base for the tongue and is connected to muscles of the jaw, larynx, and tongue. The mandible forms a joint with the base of the skull. The mandible controls the opening to the mouth and hence, the airway and gut.

The vertebral column, or spinal column, surrounds and protects the spinal cord, supports the head, and acts as an attachment point for ribs and muscles of the back and neck. It consists of 26 bones: the 24 vertebrae, the sacrum, and the coccyx. Each vertebral body has a large hole in the center through which the spinal cord passes down to the level of the first lumbar vertebra. Below this level, the hole contains spinal nerves which exit between the vertebrae. There is a notch on each side of the hole through which the spinal nerves, can exit from the spinal cord to serve different regions of the body. The vertebral column is approximately 70 cm (28 in) in adults and is curved, which can be seen from a side view.

Intervertebral discs composed of fibrous cartilage lie between adjacent vertebrae from the second cervical vertebra to the sacrum. Each disc helps form a slightly moveable joint and acts as a cushion to absorb shocks from movements such as walking and running.

The thoracic cage, also known as the rib cage consists of the ribs, sternum, thoracic vertebrae, and costal cartilages. The thoracic cage encloses and protects the organs of the thoracic cavity including the heart and lungs. It also provides support for the shoulder girdles and upper limbs and serves as the attachment point for the diaphragm, muscles of the back, chest, neck, and shoulders. Changes in the volume of the thorax enable breathing. The sternum, or breastbone, is a long flat bone located at the anterior of the chest. Like the skull, it is formed from many bones in the embryo, which fuses in the adult. The ribs are 12 pairs of long curved bones that attach to the thoracic vertebrae and curve toward the front of the body, forming the ribcage. Costal cartilages connect the anterior ends of most ribs to the sternum.

The appendicular skeleton is composed of the bones of the upper and lower limbs. It also includes the pectoral, or shoulder girdle, which attaches the upper limbs to the body, and the pelvic girdle, which attaches the lower limbs to the body (Figure 6.5).

The pectoral girdle bones transfer force generated by muscles acting on the upper limb to the thorax. It consists of the clavicles (or collarbones) in the anterior, and the scapulae (or shoulder blades) in the posterior.

The upper limb contains bones of the arm (shoulder to elbow), the forearm, and the hand. The humerus is the largest and longest bone of the upper limb. It forms a joint with the shoulder and with the forearm at the elbow. The forearm extends from the elbow to the wrist and consists of two bones. The hand includes the bones of the wrist, the palm, and the bones of the fingers.

The pelvic girdle attaches to the lower limbs of the axial skeleton. Since it is responsible for bearing the weight of the body and for locomotion, the pelvic girdle is securely attached to the axial skeleton by strong ligaments. It also has deep sockets with robust ligaments that securely attach to the femur. The pelvic girdle is mainly composed of two large hip bones. The hip bones join together in the anterior of the body at a joint called the pubic symphysis and with the bones of the sacrum at the posterior of the body.
The lower limb consists of the thigh, the leg, and the foot. The bones of the lower limbs are thicker and stronger than the bones of the upper limbs to support the entire weight of the body and the forces from locomotion. The femur, or thighbone, is the longest, heaviest, and strongest bone in the body. The femur and pelvis form the hip joint. At its other end, the femur, along with the shinbone and kneecap, form the knee joint.

### Joints and skeletal movement

The point at which two or more bones meet is called a joint, or articulation. Joints are responsible for movement, such as the movement of limbs, and stability, such as the stability found in the bones of the skull.

There are two ways to classify joints: based on their structure or based on their function. The structural classification divides joints into fibrous, cartilaginous, and synovial joints depending on the material composing the joint and the presence or absence of a cavity in the joint. The bones of fibrous joints are held together by fibrous connective tissue. There is no cavity, or space, present between the bones, so most fibrous joints do not move at all, or are only capable of minor movements. The joints between the bones in the skull and between the teeth and the bone of their sockets are examples of fibrous joints (Figure 6.6a).

Cartilaginous joints are joints in which the bones are connected by cartilage (Figure 6.6b). An example is found at the joints between vertebrae, the so-called “disks” of the backbone. Cartilaginous joints allow for very little movement.

Synovial joints are the only joints that have a space between the adjoining bones (Figure 6.6c). This space is referred to as the joint cavity and is filled with fluid. The fluid lubricates the joint, reducing friction between the bones and allowing for greater movement. The ends of the bones are covered with cartilage and the entire joint is surrounded by a capsule. Synovial joints are capable of the greatest movement of the joint types. Knees, elbows, and shoulders are examples of synovial joints.

![Figure 6.6](https://med.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Veterinary_Medicine/Book%3A_Introductory_Animal_Physiology_(Hini%C4%87-Frlog)…)

The wide range of movement allowed by synovial joints produces different types of movements. Angular movements are produced when the angle between the bones of a joint changes. Flexion, or bending, occurs when the angle between the bones decreases. Moving the forearm upward at the elbow is an example of flexion. Extension is the opposite of flexion in that the angle between the bones of a joint increases. Rotational movement is the movement of a bone as it rotates around its own longitudinal axis. Movement of the head as in saying “no” is an example of rotation.
Animal Locomotion

Humans are limited to terrestrial locomotion on two limbs or swimming with all four limbs. Other animals explore both the aquatic and aerial realm more extensively. For example, birds are excellent swimmers and fliers. However, some birds are not good at moving in both air and water. One example of birds with limited abilities in flight are penguins and another are members of an extinct group Hesperimithiformes, who, just like penguins, were not able to swim in water and only had limited locomotion on land.

Watch the video about swimming locomotion in extinct Hesperomithiformes to help you understand how skeleton and muscles coordinate to generate locomotion and why some animals may be more limited in locomotion in one type of environment.

Exercise \[
\PageIndex{1}\]

Which mode of locomotion do you think is least efficient in terms of total energy expenditure if you are considering animals of different size?