

Ectoderm is one of the three primary germ layers in the very early embryo. The other two layers are the mesoderm (middle layer) and endoderm (most proximal layer), with the ectoderm as the most exterior (or distal) layer.

It emerges and originates from the outer layer of germ cells. The word ectoderm comes from the Greek *ektos* meaning “outside”, and *derma*, meaning “skin.”

Generally speaking, the ectoderm differentiates to form the nervous system (spine, peripheral nerves and brain), tooth enamel and the epidermis (the outer part of integument). It also forms the lining of mouth, anus, nostrils, sweat glands, hair and nails.

In vertebrates, the ectoderm has three parts: external ectoderm (also known as surface ectoderm), the neural crest, and neural tube. The latter two are known as neuroectoderm.

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Last update: **2024/06/07 02:51**

