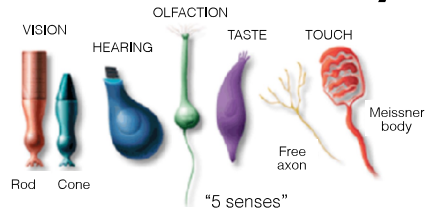


# BIOPHYSICS OF SENSORY RECEPTORS

## VISION, HEARING

MIKLÓS KELLERMAYER

## Sensory receptors



Sensory receptor: Specialized sensory cell, which responds to a given stimulus (e.g., light, sound, chemicals) and relays the information to the central nervous system.

Cell surface receptor (different meaning!): Proteins which specifically bind hormones, neurotransmitters and other molecules, and thus initiate specific cellular reactions.

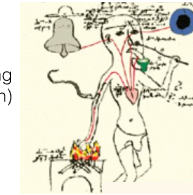
	Modality	Receptor	Organ
1	Vision	Rods and cones	Eye
2	Hearing	Hair cells	Ear (organ of Corti)
3	Olfaction (smelling)	Olfactory neuron	mucus membrane
4	Taste	Taste receptor cells	Taste buds
5	Angular acceleration	Hair cells	Ear (semicircular canals)
6	Linear acceleration	Hair cells	Ear (utricle and saccule)
7	Touch, pressure	Nerve endings	Multiple types
8	Heat	Nerve endings	Multiple types
9	Pain	Nerve endings	Multiple types
10	Cold	Free nerve endings	...
11	Joint position and motion	Nerve endings	Multiple types
12	Muscle length	Nerve endings	Muscle spindle
13	Muscle stress	Nerve endings	Golgi's tendon organ
14	Arterial pressure	Nerve endings	Sinus carotid stretch receptors
15	Central venous pressure	Nerve endings	Venous, atrial stretch receptors
16	Lung stress	Nerve endings	Pulmonary stretch receptors
17	etc...	etc...	etc...

### Sensitivity of sensory receptors

- eV-size stimulus is sufficient for evoking action potential:
- sound receptors: thermal motion of the molecules of air
  - light receptors: 1-2 photons

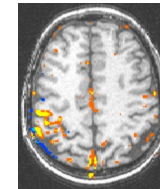
## Theories about sensing

Cardiocentric sensing (Medieval reconstruction)



Aristotle (384-322 BC) cardiocentric sensing.

Galenus (129-200 AD) raised doubts about cardiocentric sensing.



fMRI recording during sensorimotor function

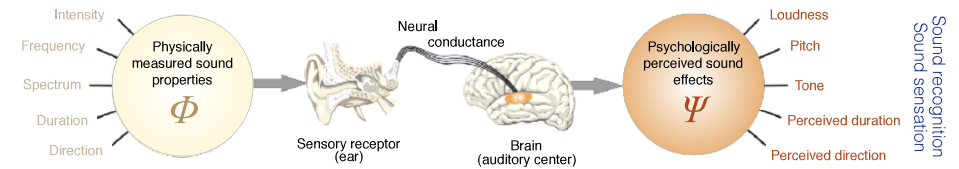


Sensory homuncle

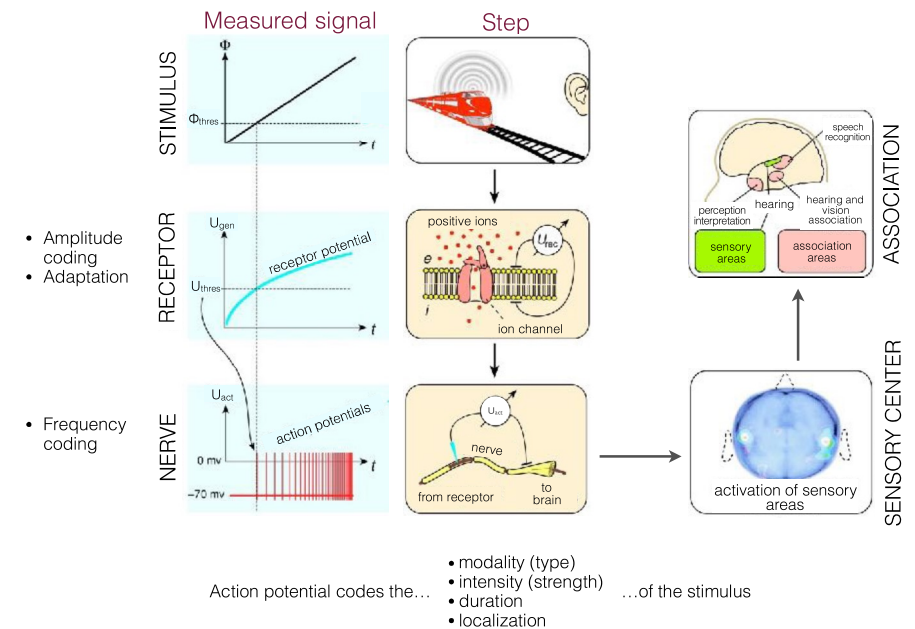
Today:

- stimulus →
- sensory receptors →
  - receptor potential →
  - neuron/nerve →
  - action potential →
  - central nervous system →
  - signal processing →
  - sensation

Process of sensing - example of hearing



## Steps of signal transduction



# 1. Modality

Physical characteristic of the stimulus

Adequate stimulus: type of energy for which the receptor is most sensitive (e.g., light for the eye).

Principle of specific sensory energies: sensation is determined by the stimulated cortical region!

# 2. Stimulus intensity and sensation

Weber-Fechner psychophysical law

$$\psi = \text{const} \cdot \lg \frac{\phi}{\phi_0}$$



Weber (1795-1878)



Fechner (1801-1887)

Stevens' law

$$\psi = \text{const} \cdot \left( \frac{\phi}{\phi_0} \right)^n$$



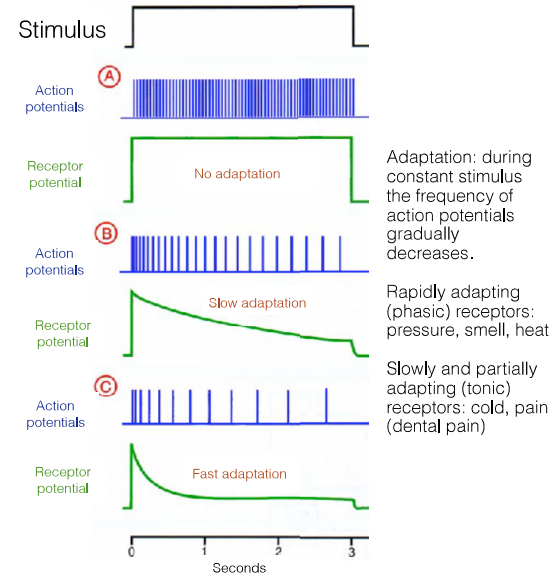
Stevens (1906-1973)

$\psi$  = sensation strength  
 $\phi$  = background intensity  
 $\phi_0$  = absolute threshold intensity  
 $n$  = constant specific for the type of sensation

$n < 1$ : compressive function (hearing, vision)

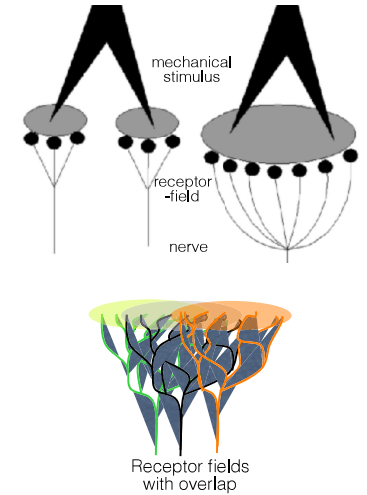
$n > 1$ : expansive function (pressure, taste)

# 3. Duration, adaptation



# 4. Localization

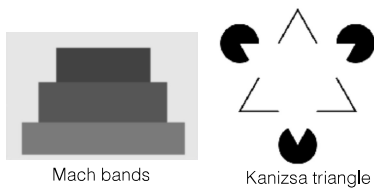
Branched nerve endings define receptor fields (convergence). Such can be found in the skin (touch) and in the peripheral retina (rods).



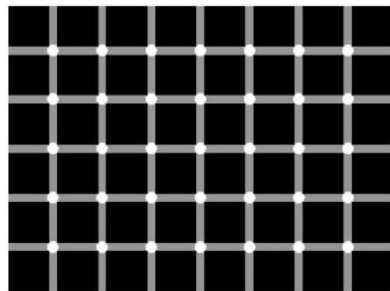
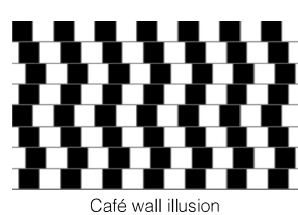
# Biophysics of vision

The visual system displays a remarkable and unusual processing power. This is demonstrated by optical illusions.

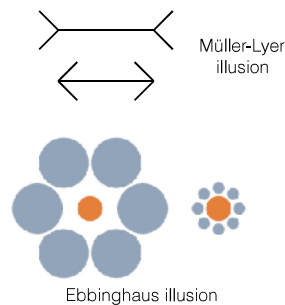
Optical illusion - intensity



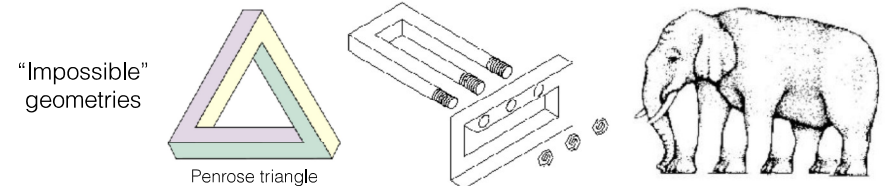
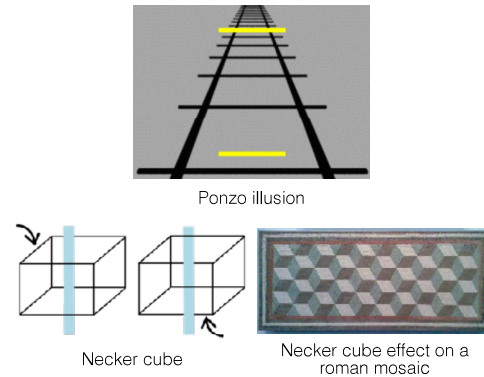
Optical illusion - direction, size



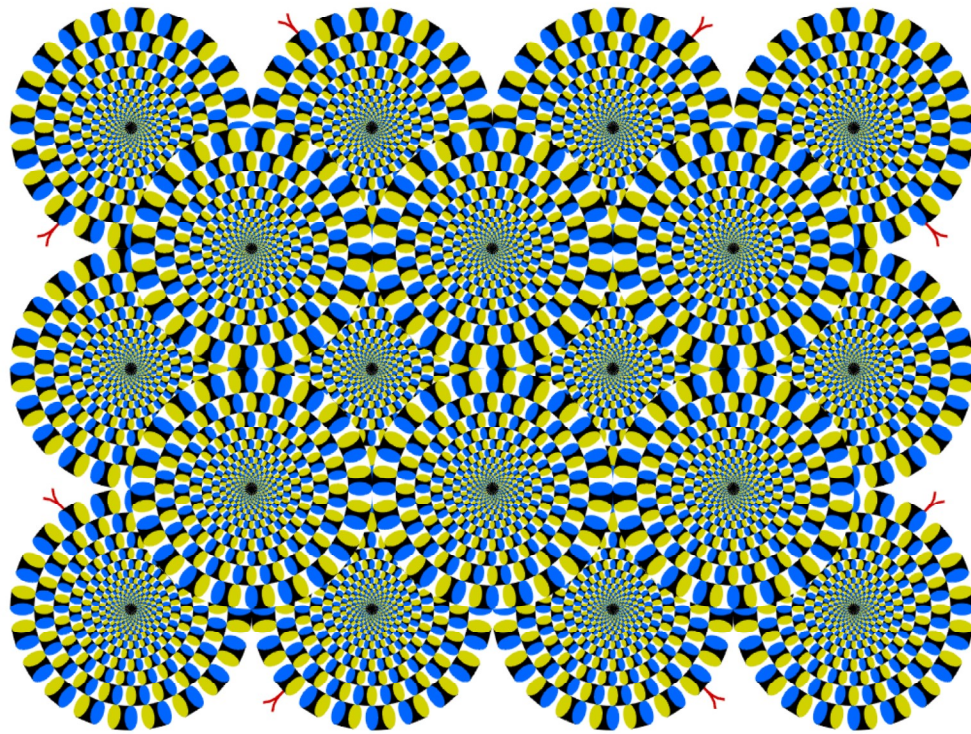
How many black circles can we count?



# Optical illusions – space, shape

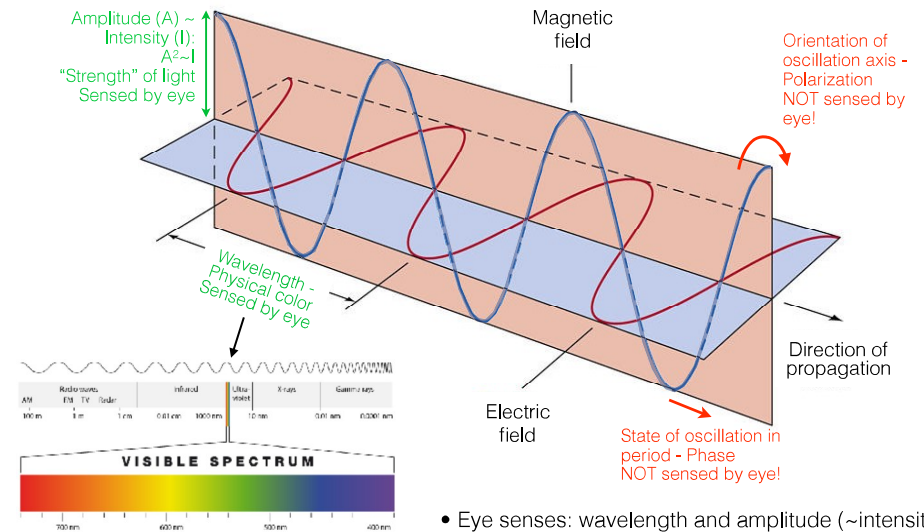






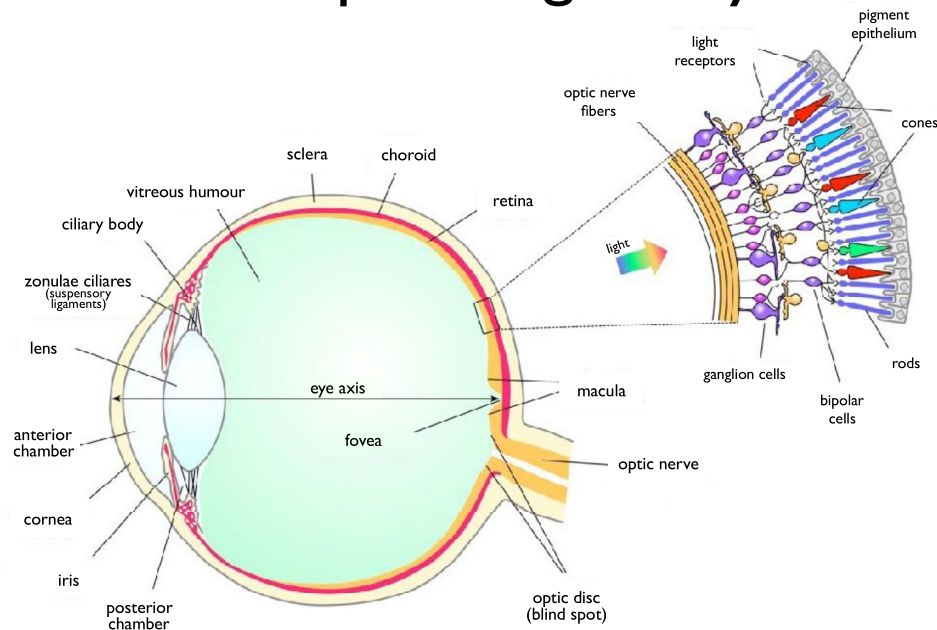
# Stimulus of vision: light

Electromagnetic (transverse) wave

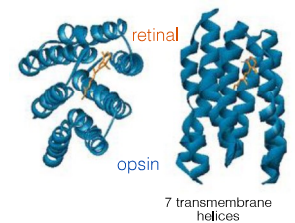
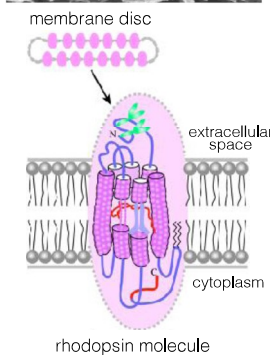
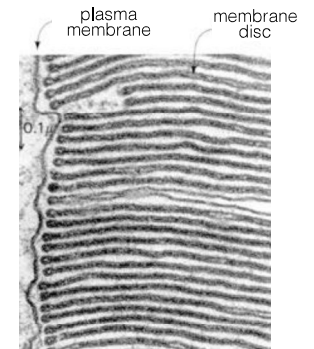
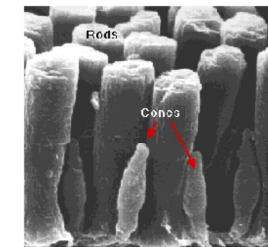
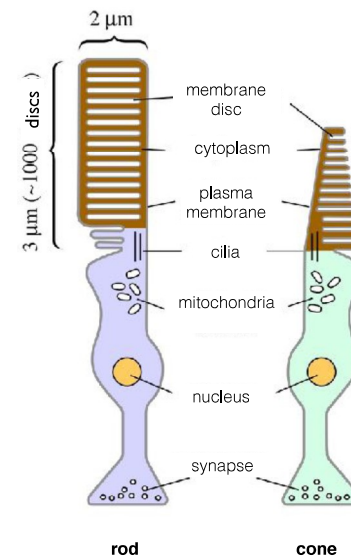


- Eye senses: wavelength and amplitude (~intensity)
- Eye is insensitive to: phase and polarization

## "Receptor-organ": eye

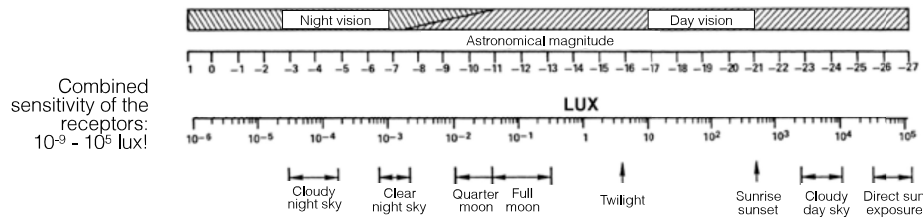


## Photoreceptors



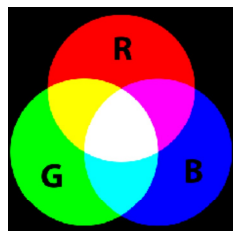
# Properties of receptor cells

Rods	Cones
Stimulated by very small intensity (down to 1 photon!)	Smaller sensitivity, but is able to function at high intensities
Saturates at average intensities	No saturation
Found mainly in the peripheral retina	In the fovea, mainly the central fovea
Many rods per ganglion (convergence); greater sensitivity, smaller spatial resolution	Small convergence; greater spatial resolution
No color sensitivity	Sensitivity to colors
Large frequency sensitivity	Flow frequency sensitivity (~20 hz)



## Color sensing

Color: sensation and not a physical property (not all colors can be defined by a wavelength)

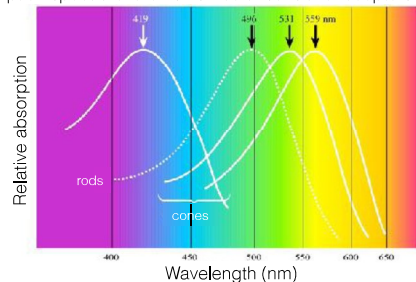


### Additive color coding

Any color ( $X$ ) may be generated by mixing three basic colors ( $R$ =red,  $G$ =green,  $B$ =blue) with varying weighing factors ( $r$ ,  $g$ ,  $b$ ):

$$X = rR + gG + bB$$

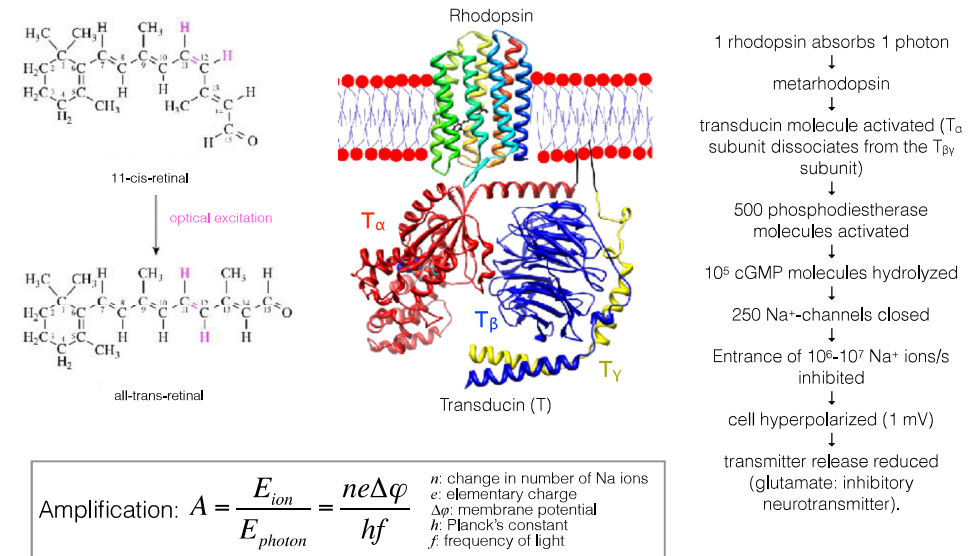
Absorption spectra of the human color-sensitive receptors (cones)



In the human eye:

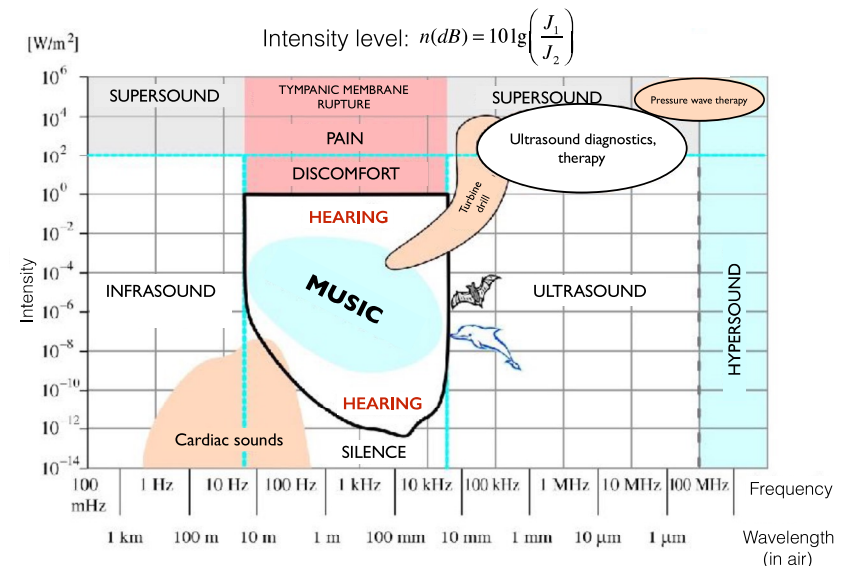
- 3 different color-sensitive receptors.
- Each receptor absorbs in different regions of the visible spectrum ( $R=64\%$ ,  $G=32\%$ ,  $B=2\%$ ).

# Basis of light sensing: photochemical reaction



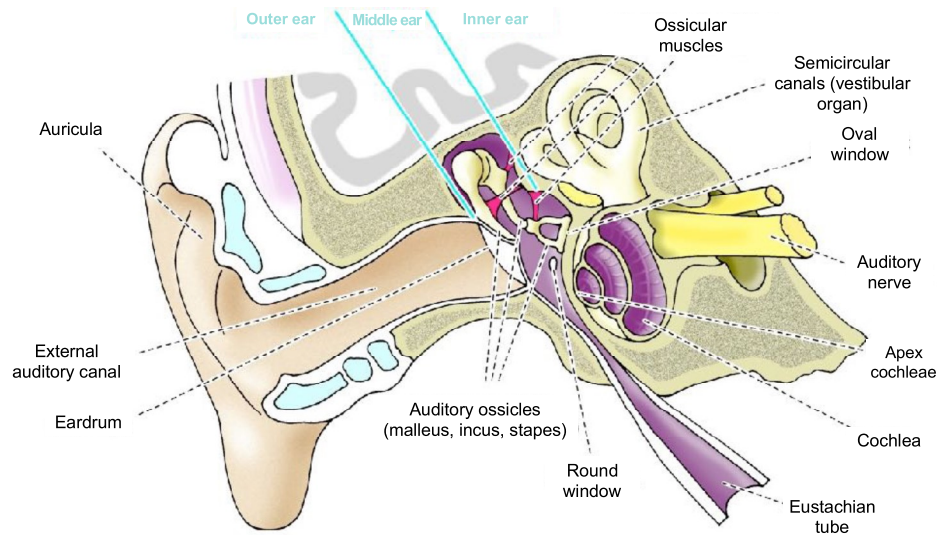
## Biophysics of hearing

Stimulus: sound - mechanical wave





# “Receptor-organ”: ear



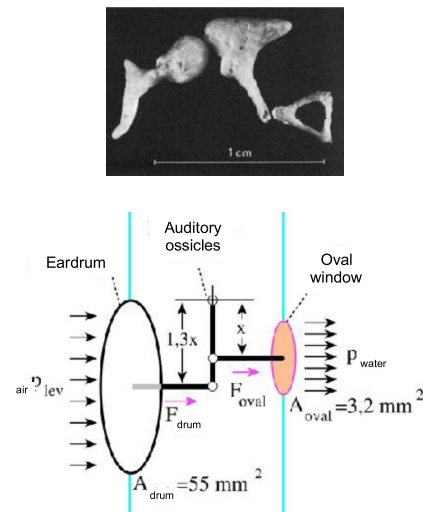
## Middle ear: mechanical transmitter and amplifier

**Auditory ossicles**  
(malleus, incus, stapes)

They **amplify** eardrum resonance and transmit it to the oval window. (N.B.: due to the difference in the acoustic impedance of air and water, total reflection would occur!)

**Amplification:**  
due to area ratio:  $17 \times$   
due to lever action:  $1,3 \times$

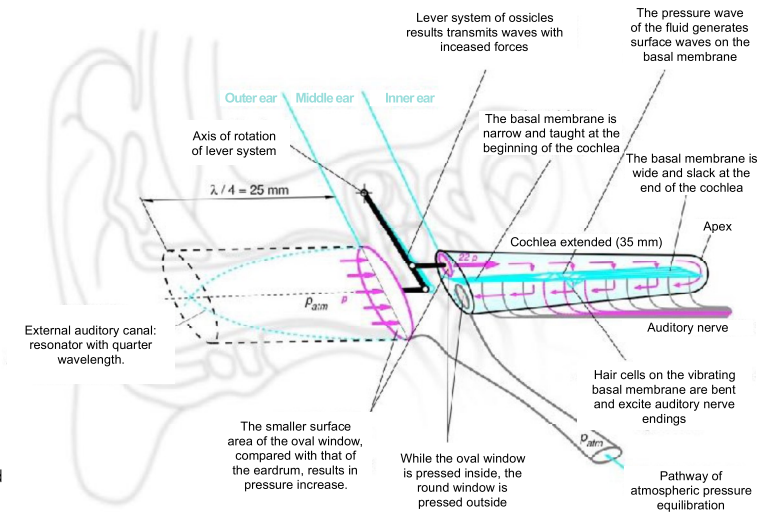
**Total amplification:**  $22 \times$  (pressure increase)



# Physical schematics of the ear

Outer ear:

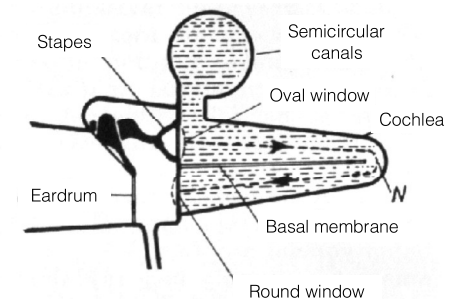
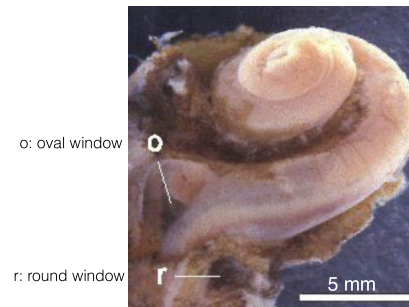
- 1. Auricula**  
Sound is steered into the external auditory canal.
- 2. External auditory canal**  
Conducts pressure waves towards the eardrum. More efficient in certain frequency range (2000-5000 Hz).
- 3. Eardrum**  
Brought into resonance by sound waves. Its oscillation amplitude at the stimulus threshold:  $10^{-11}$  m (slightly exceeds that caused by thermal noise!)



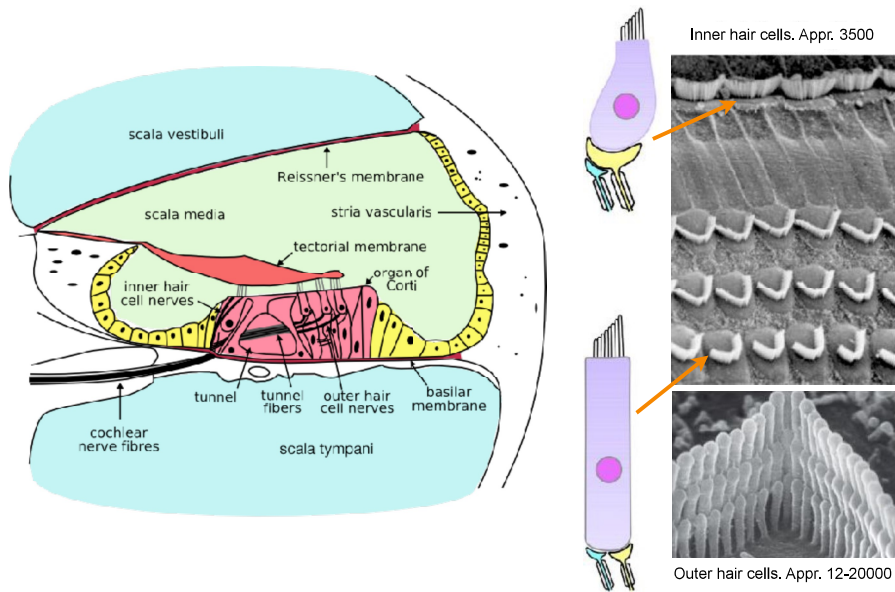
## Inner ear: sensor

Vestibular organ: semicircular canals

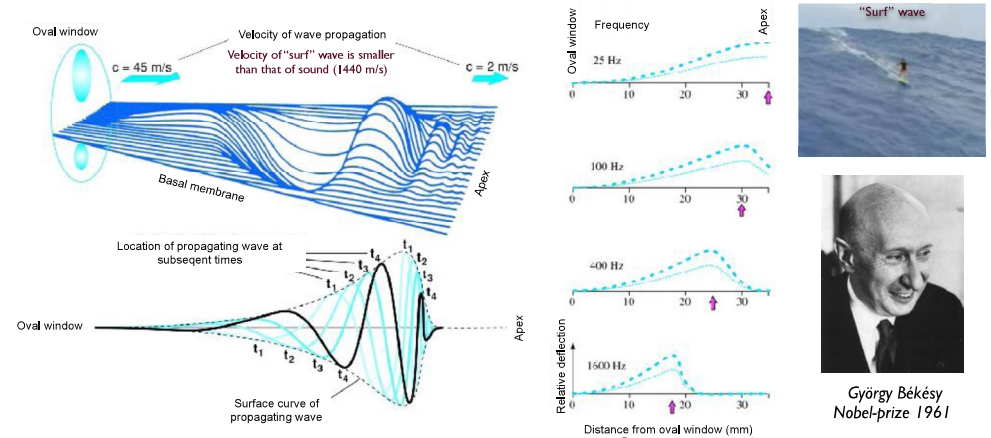
**Cochlea:** 2.5-pitch, 35-mm-long fluid-filled channel. It is halved in length partly by an osseous, partly by a membranaceous wall, the basal membrane. Sensory organ of sound.



# Ultrastructure of the inner ear



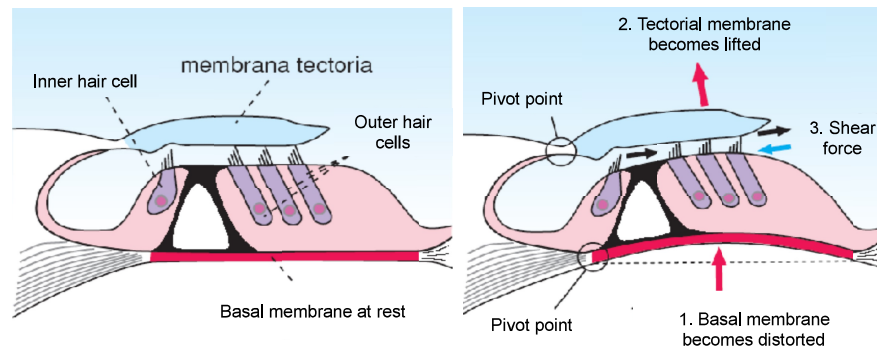
# Békésy: propagating surface waves on basal membrane



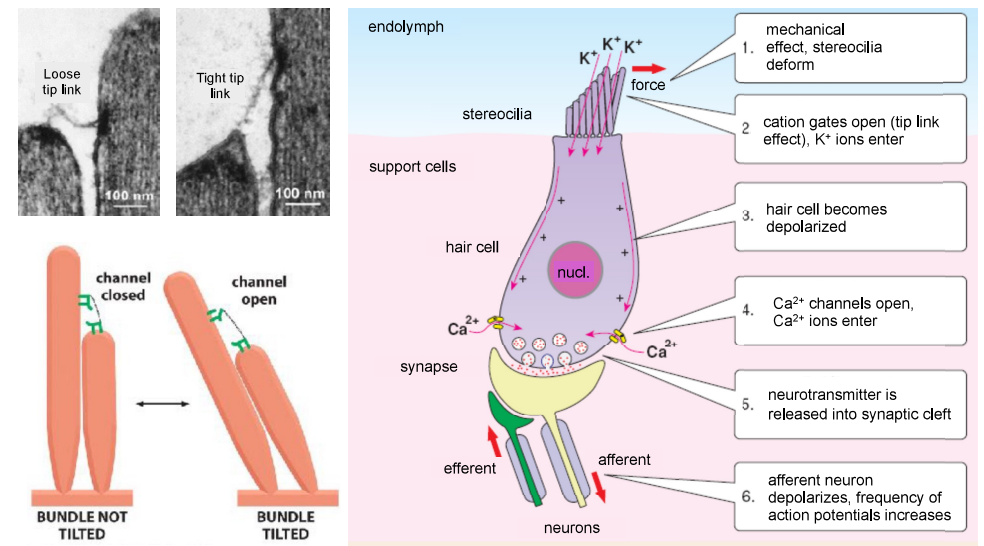
The frequency-dependence of the location of propagating wave maxima provide a rough frequency-discrimination.

# Function of the organ of Corti

Due to the bending of the basal membrane, hair cells become tilted and depolarized.

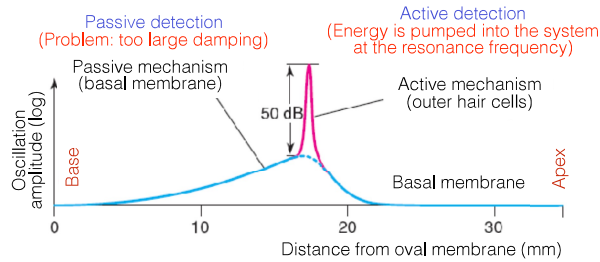


# Inner hair cells: Mechanoelectric transducers





# Outer hair cells: amplifiers



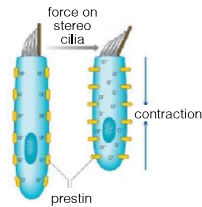
Observations pointing at active detection:

- T. Gold (1948): analogy with regenerative radio receivers (positive feedback at a given frequency: selectivity + sensitivity).
- W. Rode (1971): living ear is more sensitive.
- D. Kemp (1979): the ear generates sound (otoacoustic emission).

Regenerative amplifier: positive feedback mechanism (Large amplification in narrow frequency range. Only the dissipated energy is regenerated, otherwise ringing occurs)

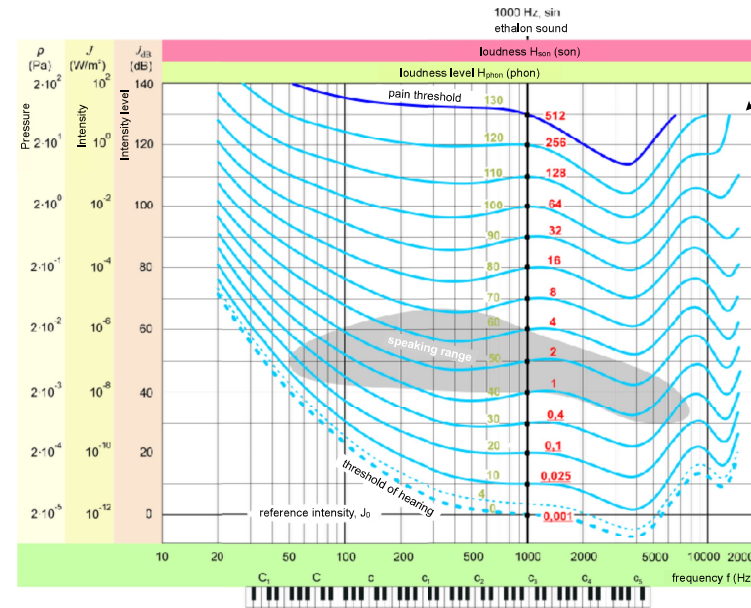


Amplification: sound-induced contraction in outer hair cells



Prestin - transmembrane motor protein. Mechano-electric and electromechanical transduction

# Stimulus intensity and sensing - psychoacoustics



Isophon curves: connect points of identical loudness level  
Fletcher-Munson curves

Disco 120 phon

Street noise 80 phon

Loud speaking 60 phon

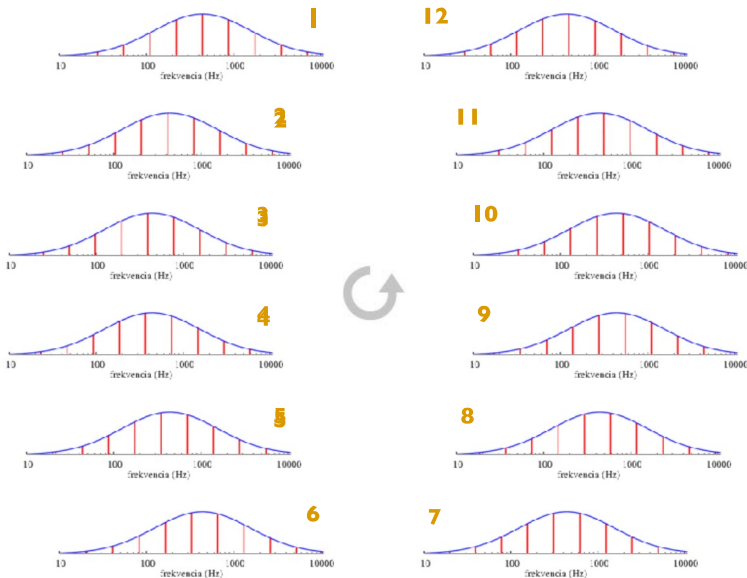
Whisper 30 phon

N.B.: The loudness level of a sound, in phon, is the dB value of a 1000 Hz sound with which we hear it identically loud.

Subjective loudness (son scale): 10 dB increase in loudness level is perceived as doubling of loudness. (Stevens law)

## Acoustic illusion?

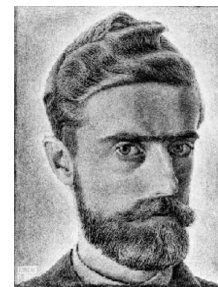
Shepard tone: sine waves separated by octaves



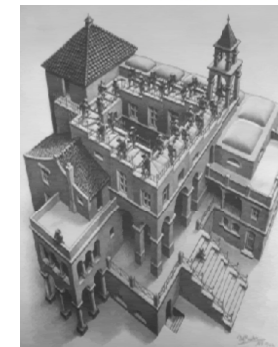
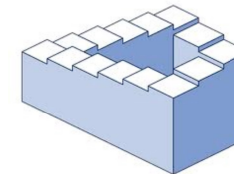
Shepard scale: fundamental frequency moves

## Acoustic illusion?

Visual analogs of the Shepard scale:



Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972)



Escher staircase



Barber's pole