

The primary organ of the female reproductive system is the **ovary**, which produces the female germ cells (*ova*) and secretes the hormones *estrogen* and *progesterone*. Each ovary arises on the posterior abdominal wall in the lumbar region during early fetal development. Like the descent of the testes, the ovary is interrupted early in its downward journey by the round ligament and is retained in the true pelvis. The **uterus** serves as a site for implantation and nourishment of the developing embryo/fetus. The **uterine tubes** provide a conduit for the newly fertilized or unfertilized ovum en route to the uterus; the uterine end of the tube can also be an implant site for a confused fertilized ovum that implants there (ectopic pregnancy; a potentially life-threatening event). The **vagina**, a fibromuscular sheath, receives the penis in sexual intercourse, provides a path for the semen to reach the uterus, and acts as a birth canal for the newborn entering a new and really different world. See pages 159 and 160.

The female **external genitals** (*vulva*) are structures associated with the facilitation of a successful and possibly productive union by sexual partners, and delivery of a newborn that is successful for both the mother and child. The external genitals are located in the superficial perineum (page 51). The **labia majora** are fat-filled folds of skin that arise anteriorly from the anterior commissure of the vulva and never quite merge posteriorly as they become part of the skin over the perineal body. Medial to the labia majora, and on either side of the vagina and urethra, are two thin, non-fatty folds of skin (**labia minora**). The space or cavity between them is the **vestibule** into which the vagina and urethra open. These smaller labia can be followed anteriorly to the **glans** and **body** of the **clitoris**, around which folds of the labia minora pass over the head and body of the clitoris like a shawl (**prepuce**) and under the head (**frenulum**) like the ends of the shawl tied together under the chin. Posteriorly, the minor labia come together (*fourchette*) over the perineal body. This fusion is indistinct after sexual activity begins. Like the penis, the clitoris has an erectile **crus** (pl., *crura*) arising from each ischiopubic ramus; the two crura join in the midline to form the erectile **body** or corpus. This body is enclosed in fascia and capped by a skin-covered, vascular, sensitive **glans clitoridis**. The rigidity of the clitoris is accomplished by the same mechanism operative in the penis; however, the clitoris, unlike the penis, does not incorporate the urethra. The erectile **bulbs of the vestibule** are homologous with the bulb of the penis, but separated into two bodies. They are covered by the bulbospongiosus muscle and protrude into the vagina during sexual stimulation. The immature vaginal orifice is often closed or partly so by a thin mucosal membrane (**hymen**); the mature vaginal orifice is often surrounded by a thin remnant of this mucosa that was often torn with general physical or sexual activity.