

The nucleus contains the cell's genome. It is bounded by a membrane that consists of a pair of unit membranes separated by a space of variable thickness. The inner membrane is usually a simple sac, but the outermost membrane is, in many places, continuous with the endoplasmic reticulum (ER). The nuclear membrane exhibits selective permeability because of pores, which consist of a complex of several proteins whose function is to import substances into and export substances out of the nucleus. The chromosomes of eukaryotic cells contain linear DNA macromolecules arranged as a double helix. They are only visible with a light microscope when the cell is undergoing division and the DNA is in a highly condensed form; at other times, the chromosomes are not condensed and appear as in Figure 2-2. Eukaryotic DNA macromolecules are associated with basic proteins called histones that bind to the DNA by ionic interactions. A structure often visible within the nucleus is the nucleolus, an area rich in RNA that is the site of ribosomal RNA synthesis (see Figure 2-2). Ribosomal proteins synthesized in the cytoplasm are transported into the nucleolus and combine with ribosomal RNA to form the small and large subunits of the eukaryotic ribosome. These are then exported to the cytoplasm, where they associate to form an intact ribosome that can function in protein synthesis.