Iodine deficiency damages IQ
Women who do not get enough iodine during pregnancy risk harming the IQ of their unborn children, researchers have warned. A study at the universities of Bristol and Surrey has concluded that babies deprived of iodine in the womb are 50% more likely to be among the least intelligent quarter of children by the age of eight. Although milk and fish both supply a ready source of the chemical element, there is evidence that many Britons are not consuming enough, says the report in The Lancet: two-thirds of 1,000 pregnant women who had their levels tested were found to be iodine deficient. Pregnant women are advised to consume 250mcg of iodine a day; a glass of milk contains about a quarter of this amount, while 100g of white fish contains half the daily recommended dose. However, there is a risk associated with taking too much iodine, and therefore pregnant women are not advised to take iodine supplements (which often come in the form of seaweed pills).

A shock to get better at maths
If your children are struggling with their sums, maybe their teacher should zap them with electricity. It sounds barbaric, but in an Oxford University study involving 51 people, those who had a light electrical current passing through their brains learnt sums, and remembered figures (such as times tables) significantly better than those who did not. They could also perform calculations 30% faster. Moreover, this skills gap was still apparent six months later, reports the Daily Mail. “The study suggests a safe and cheap way we can improve people’s maths with limited intervention,” said Dr Roi Cohen Kadosh, who led the research published in the journal Current Biology. However, other experts were sceptical of the claim, and

Feet: home to almost 200 types of fungi

A “stark warning” for British wildlife
Hedgehogs, turtle doves, harbour seals and small tortoiseshell butterflies. These cherished species are all in sharp decline in the UK – along with many others that are less well known, according to one of the most in-depth analyses of British wildlife in recent years. The State of Nature report, which was based on data provided by 25 conservation groups, found that 60% of plant and animal species had declined in the past 50 years – and that one in ten were now facing extinction, says The Times. Turtle doves have declined by 93% since 1970, largely owing to changing agricultural practices. Hedgehogs have seen their numbers fall by a third in the past 15 years alone, largely because of urban development.

Meanwhile, the small tortoiseshell butterfly, once common, has seen its numbers drop 77% in a decade, owing in part to a string of cold summers. Others on the warning list include lesser-spotted woodpeckers, barbastelle bats and natterjack toads. David Attenborough, who presented the report last week, described it as a “stark warning”.

Prostate removed
Angelina Jolie made headlines when she revealed that she’d had a double mastectomy, after testing positive for the “faulty” gene – BRCA1 – linked to an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer. Now, an unnamed Londoner has become the first man to have an apparently healthy prostate removed after testing positive for BRCA2, which increases the risk of prostate cancer. The 53-year-old wanted to avoid the fate of his relatives who had died of cancer, reports The Daily Mail. A standard screening test showed no abnormality; nor did an MRI scan. Doctors were only persuaded to carry out the surgery, which renders men infertile and can also cause incontinence and sexual dysfunction, when tissue samples showed microscopic malignancy. To their surprise, there were indeed a small number of cancerous cells in the organ.

Boosting the IVF success rate
A new form of IVF promises to dramatically boost people’s chances of conceiving a baby, reports The Daily Telegraph. The doctors who devised the procedure say that in their trial it had a success rate of 78%, almost triple the average for IVF treatment in this country. Most cycles fail because of genetic abnormalities that are not obvious at the earliest stages of development. The new system works by taking thousands of pictures of the embryos, from the moment they are created in the lab to the day they are implanted. By examining these sophisticated time-lapse images, doctors can much more easily pinpoint which embryos are developing properly, and are most likely to result in the birth of a healthy baby. The process adds £750 to the £3,000 average cost of a cycle of IVF, and is already available as an “add on” at a clinic in Nottingham. If proved reliable in a larger randomised control trial, it could become standard practice, and perhaps even be made available on the NHS. Each year, licensed clinics carry out about 60,000 cycles of IVF, most of which fail – placing a great emotional, and financial, burden on couples who are desperate to conceive.

The fungi growing on your feet
They live on the skin all over our bodies – but fungi feel most at home between our toes, says BBC News online. According to new research, there are almost 200 types of fungi living on the average foot. Around 80 reside on the heel, which is also the most complex fungal habitat. But most, it seems, gravitate towards the end of the foot: the researchers found about 60 types in toenail clippings and 40 types lurking between the toes. Other popular sites elsewhere on the body included behind the ears. The study – the most extensive of its kind – was designed to find better ways of treating fungal infections, such as athlete’s foot and ringworm.

A few treats won’t hurt
It’s true: a little of what you fancy does do you good – or at least no harm, says The Times. Following a study in the US, researchers have concluded that the odd sweet treat won’t make you fat, or give you a heart attack. The team analysed more than 5,000 Americans, and found that those who ate sweets and chocolates at least every other day were no more at risk of being overweight, or suffering from cardiovascular disease, than those who limited themselves to treats once a week or less. “There is a place for little pleasures, such as candy, in life,” said the study author, in the Nutrition Journal.