

1. Gossip is good for you

These days, it seems, every kind of human behaviour is being subjected to scientific research, and the latest is an activity often frowned on – gossiping.

An 18-month long American study found that far from being a negative activity, gossiping is actually good for you and is, in fact, central to human society.

And rather than being idle chat, as is often assumed, gossip can yield vital information about people and events not available by any other means. The study also found that, contrary to popular belief, men gossip just as much as women, and on exactly the same subjects.

The difference is that whereas women tend to talk about other people, men concentrate mainly on talking about themselves.

The authors of the study, American anthropologists Kevin Kniffin and David Wilson, whose research is just published in the journal *Human Nature*, said that gossip has an important function in policing the behaviour of a group, and defining group membership.

Dr Wilson added that the act of coming together in a small group to share information is a deep-seated human instinct, and comparable to the 'grooming' behaviour of monkeys, which helps them to bond in a group.

It seems that people spread good gossip when they feel an intimate part of a particular group, and make derogatory remarks when they feel marginalised or excluded.

2. Bladder weakness explained

Very many people have a problem they find so embarrassing they won't even tell their doctor. This is bladder weakness, where urine leaks uncontrollably from time to time.

And it doesn't mean you're a bad person!

The Continence Foundation, a charity founded in 1992, exists to help people with this problem, in complete confidence. There is a helpline available, plus factsheets and leaflets which explain the condition, and what can be done about it. The Foundation can also put sufferers in touch with their nearest NHS Continence clinic.

Information officer Ian Holland said: "Our website gets 14,000 hits a month, which gives some idea of how common the condition is. The main symptoms of an overactive bladder are extreme urgency, which can't wait, and a need to go to the loo more than eight times a day.

"The condition often disrupts sleep, and interferes with normal social life, where sufferers often daren't venture out of the house in case they need to 'go'.

"We have an 'Urgent' card that sufferers can use, stating that the holder of this card has a medical condition and needs to use the toilet quickly. The card has no legal force," adds Ian Holland, "but is useful in situations where there is a long queue for maybe two toilets."

The Foundation's advice line, 0845 345 0165, is manned between 9.30 am and 1 pm weekdays, or you can visit their website, www.continence-foundation.org.uk

Tena is a Swedish company specialising in products for bladder weakness which, they say, is as common as hayfever and can be caused by the menopause, constipation, nerve damage, infection, being overweight, and weakened pelvic floor muscles. 75 per cent of sufferers are female and this kind of weakness is not, as is often supposed, a condition confined to the elderly, although it can become worse with age.

Negative perceptions about the condition have been reinforced by bulky 'continence pads' but products have now become thin, discreet, extremely absorbent and widely available in supermarkets.

There is as yet no actual cure for the condition, but using the right product can make you feel safe when going out. Tena Lady products are specifically for women, and Tena Pants can be used by both men and women.

3. Natural relief for arthritis

It's often said that the old remedies are the best, and Tabritis Rubbing Oils, which have been on the market for 50 years, have stood the test of time.

There is as yet no cure for arthritis, and most prescription treatments, which are in effect high-strength painkillers, in time set up severe side-effects. This has led to at least two, Copraxamol and Viox, being withdrawn from the market.

Tabritis oils, applied externally, contain peppermint, clove and eucalyptus and have an anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving effect. Tablets, containing prickly ash bark, elderflower, burdock and yarrow, cost £7.99 for 100 tablets and the oils, £7.55 a bottle.

Both are available from most supermarkets and chemists, and are made by Potters, the herbal medicines company which has been going for 200 years. For further information, call 0191 523 6578, or visit www.pottersherbals.co.uk

4. Redheads are more sensitive – official

Do you have the ginger gene? If so, not only are you more likely to burn in the sun, but you will suffer pain and feel the cold more acutely than those with other hair colours.

Scientists at Louisville University, Kentucky,

found that redheads were more sensitive both to pain and extremes of temperature than others, and needed significantly more anaesthesia during operations. Dr Daniel Sessler, who led the study, said: "It seems that the redhead gene may affect the pain pathway." This gene, known as MC1R, seems to cause the temperature-detecting gene to become overactivated.

Simon Cheetham, founder of the website Red and Proud, commented that the research shattered the myth of the tough, ginger Scottish male. He said: "The fact is that most redheads can't cope with extremes of temperature."

4. Supersnorers are born, not made

Ever wondered why some people snore worse than others? Now at last all can be explained. According to snoring expert Dr Igor Fajdiga, it's all to do with the shape of the throat – and little to do with lifestyle or eating and drinking habits.

Dr Fajdiga, who carried out his research in Slovenia, discovered that supersnorers had narrower throats than others, and that the loudest snorers had the narrowest throats.

The noise we know as snoring is created when the air we breathe becomes obstructed passing through the airways to the lungs. During waking hours, we have enough muscle tone to keep the airway open, but this is lost during sleep, when the airway narrows.

Twice as many men as women suffer from snoring, although it has to be said that the main sufferer is the sleeping partner – or indeed, anybody within earshot. Snoring at its worst can reach a level of 70 decibels – as loud as a pneumatic drill.

Surgery can sometimes help but according to Professor John Gibson of the British Thoracic Society, the effects tend to wear off after a few years and the noise is back.