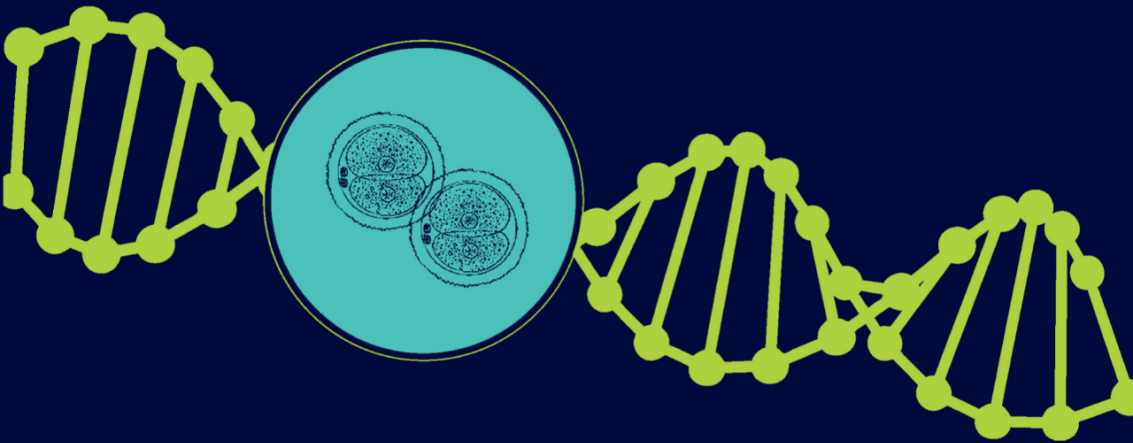


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# 30-SECOND **BIOLOGY**

THE 50 MOST THOUGHT-PROVOKING THEORIES OF LIFE,  
EACH EXPLAINED IN HALF A MINUTE

*Editors* Nick Battey & Mark Fellowes

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# CONTENTS

- 6 Introduction
  
- 10 Life**
  - 12 GLOSSARY
  - 14 Origins of Life – Viruses
  - 16 Archaea
  - 18 Bacteria
  - 20 **Profile: Lynn Margulis**
  - 22 Protists
  - 24 Fungi
  - 26 Plants
  - 28 Animals
  - 30 Controversy: Synthetic Life
  
- 32 Genes**
  - 34 GLOSSARY
  - 36 DNA, RNA, Proteins
  - 38 Mendelian Genetics
  - 40 Population Genetics
  - 42 Epigenetics
  - 44 Genomics & Other 'omics
  - 46 **Profile: Bill Hamilton**
  - 48 Controversy: Genetic Screening
  
- 50 Genes to Organisms**
  - 52 GLOSSARY
  - 54 Cells & Cell Division
  - 56 Cell Communication
  - 58 **Profile: Harald zur Hausen**
  - 60 Immunity
  - 62 Neurons
  - 64 Muscles
  - 66 Circulatory System
  - 68 Controversy: Stem Cells
  
- 70 Growth & Reproduction**
  - 72 GLOSSARY
  - 74 Development & Reproduction: Bacteria
  - 76 Development: Animals
  - 78 Reproduction: Animals
  - 80 Development: Plants
  - 82 Reproduction: Plants
  - 84 Cancer
  - 86 **Profile: Elizabeth Blackburn**
  - 88 Controversy: GM Organisms
  
- 90 Energy & Nutrition**
  - 92 GLOSSARY
  - 94 Respiration
  - 96 **Profile: Norman Borlaug**
  - 98 Photosynthesis
  - 100 Metabolism
  - 102 Nutrition
  - 104 Excretion
  - 106 Cellular Senescence & Death
  - 108 Controversy: Biofuels
  
- 110 Evolution**
  - 112 GLOSSARY
  - 114 Adaptation & Speciation
  - 116 Sexual Selection
  - 118 Coevolution
  - 120 **Profile: Charles Darwin**
  - 122 Mutualisms
  - 124 Behaviour
  - 126 Global Phylogeny
  - 128 Controversy: Why We Age
  
- 130 Ecology**
  - 132 GLOSSARY
  - 134 Biogeography
  - 136 Population Ecology
  - 138 Food Webs
  - 140 Ecosystem Energetics
  - 142 **Profile: Jane Goodall**
  - 144 Climate Change Biology
  - 146 Invasive Species
  - 148 Extinction
  - 150 Controversy: The Anthropocene
  
- 152 Appendices**
  - 154 Resources
  - 156 Notes on Contributors
  - 158 Index
  - 160 Acknowledgements

# INTRODUCTION

Nick Battey & Mark Fellowes

It's a little over 200 years since the word 'biology' was invented to identify the part of the natural world capable of reproducing and maintaining itself. In the beginning it attracted vitalist thinking (the assumption that life required some mysterious 'force' to sustain it), as people sought to account for the unusual abilities of living organisms. But the development of cell theory, physiology and the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century gradually helped to fill the gaps about how life worked. In the twentieth century genetics, biochemistry, molecular biology and developmental biology established clear mechanistic knowledge of the way life runs itself, showing how the features and processes characteristic of organisms are regulated during the life of the individual and passed on to offspring. At the same time, ecology, evolutionary biology and biogeography became key disciplines for understanding the behaviour and interactions of populations of organisms with each other and their environment. The subdisciplines of zoology, botany, microbiology and virology elucidated the details of how life within the different kingdoms worked, while taxonomists and systematists explored its hierarchies and origins.

## Twenty-first century science

The domains of biology continue to expand, making it no exaggeration to claim that it is the science of this century; there is little of global importance that is not touched by it. Biomedicine, including regenerative medicine and medical genetics, is exploiting biological knowledge to give ever-increasing control over life, death, illness and disease. At the same time, the other aspects of biology allow us to engage with the crucial problems that threaten to overwhelm society – climate change, population growth, pollution, food shortages, erosion of natural resources and species invasions. In a sense the integrative, ecological dimensions to biology take on the consequences of advances in human biology. As the dominant discipline of the Anthropocene (the proposed new geological epoch that reflects the current human domination of our planet, see page 150), biology conditions



*Amoeba proteus is a tiny one-celled organism often found in freshwater environments.*

what we can do and shapes how we deal with the results of our actions. Almost everything that matters is affected by biology.

The one notable absence from this brief appraisal is culture. Broadly speaking, culture can be considered to be the consequence of human consciousness, passed on through the generations not by genes but by one form or other of mental transmission. Psychology deals with the human mind, and we have not considered it part of biology in this book because it is a distinct subject with largely separate traditions to biology; and biology itself is anyway big enough as originally defined. But an obvious prediction is that rigorous biological explanations of the way the mind works, and eventually of the way culture works, will be definitive advances when viewed from the perspective of 2050: that the *30-Second Biology* of that date will include the science of the mind as a dominant feature. A different guess might be that biological explanations of the mind and the culture it generates are prosaic: what matters is not what causes culture but what it means to us, a realm in which biological explanations may be of little interest. Not so, though, the central place of biology in the future life of the human species. How we deal with a rapidly growing (and ageing) population, the destruction of habitats,



*The impact of climate change and human settlements on the alpine habitat of snow leopards makes them an endangered species.*

and how we regulate what we do with our biological power, will be critical issues that it will take all our biological and cultural skills to address.

### **How this book works**

In *30-Second Biology* each topic is clearly and concisely presented on one page in a punchy single paragraph: the **30-second theory**. For an even quicker overview, there is the **3-second dissection** alongside – the key facts encompassed in a single sentence. Then the **3-minute synthesis** fleshes this out, addressing a thought-provokingly quirky or intriguing aspect of the subject. Each chapter also contains the biography of a pioneer or high achiever in the field – people such as Norman Borlaug, the developer of high-yielding, semi-dwarf wheat, who is credited with saving millions from starvation and hailed as the ‘father of the green revolution’.

The book begins with **Life**, a scan of the major groups of living organisms. It then discusses **Genes**, the blueprint of life, and, in **Genes to Organisms**, looks at how the information encoded by genes is transformed into the cells and tissues of living organisms. Next **Growth & Reproduction** are considered, focusing on these processes in plants, animals and bacteria. **Energy & Nutrition** looks at how energy is converted into life, and how living processes maintain and are maintained within bodies. Finally, the chapters on **Evolution** and **Ecology** discuss how life arose, how organisms live together and the peculiar strains placed on these relationships by the phenomenal growth of the human species. It is this dominance that threatens to destabilize everything on the planet; the growth of biology is one reason for it, but understanding how life works and how organisms interact seems to us something intrinsically beautiful. Let’s see if that category still exists in 2050.









**LIFE**

## LIFE GLOSSARY

**biofilm** Self-sufficient community of bacteria in which different species may cooperate, some recycling the wastes of others. Dental plaque is a biofilm.

**cell** Smallest unit of an organism, typically but not always consisting of a nucleus and cytoplasm encircled by a membrane. Many microscopic organisms – such as bacteria and yeasts – consist of just one cell.

**centrioles** Organelles (compartments within a cell) found in pairs close to the nucleus in animal cells. Centrioles play a key role in cell division.

**chloroplast** A plastid (type of organelle) found in the cells of green plants, in which photosynthesis occurs.

**choanoflagellates** Free-living single-celled microscopic eukaryotes believed to have been the evolutionary ancestors of animals. They are flagellate – they contain whip-like organelles known as *flagella*.

**cloning** Asexual reproduction of genetically identical copies of an original organism or cell. Cloning occurs naturally: plants' and animals' body cells are ultimately clones of an original fertilized egg. Cells are also cloned in the laboratory: for example, the nucleus can be removed from an egg and replaced with the nucleus of a cell of the type to be cloned.

**cyanobacteria** Single-celled prokaryotic organisms that derive energy through photosynthesis. Also known as blue-green bacteria, they are the earliest known lifeform on Earth – their fossil record in western Australia dates to 3.5 billion years ago.

**cytoplasm** The part of a cell that surrounds the nucleus and is enclosed by the cell's outer membrane – the cellular membrane.

**DNA** Deoxyribonucleic acid, a molecule that carries the coded genetic information that transmits inherited traits. DNA is found in the cells of all prokaryotes and eukaryotes.

**Dolly the sheep** The first mammal to be cloned from an adult cell. In 1996 a team from the Roslin Institute and biotech firm PPL Therapeutics cloned Dolly, a domestic sheep, from a sheep's mammary gland cell using the nuclear transfer method (adding new genetic material into a cell from which the original genetic material had been taken out). Dolly was genetically identical to the sheep whose genetic material was added to the mammary gland cell. She lived more than six and half years from 5 July 1996 to 14 February 2003.

**eukaryote** Organism or cell that has a discrete nucleus.



# MUSCLES

## the 30-second theory

### 3-SECOND DISSECTION

Muscles rapidly change chemical energy in an organism into some form of movement.

### 3-MINUTE SYNTHESIS

There are around 650 skeletal muscles in the human body. The myofibril filaments within muscle cells are mainly made of the proteins actin and myosin. In addition to enabling animals to move about in their environment, muscular movements are needed for sensory evaluation – for example moving and focusing the eye. Muscles in the thorax and larynx facilitate the generation of sound and the use of language; facial muscles enable emotional and non-verbal communication.

## Muscles are about movement:

humans walking, fish swimming, birds flying. They also cause movement inside the body, such as the heartbeat, which in humans typically occurs about 60–70 times per minute, supplying oxygenated blood to all organs – including other muscles. For physical movement of the body, muscles are firmly attached to the bones of the skeleton, and hence called ‘skeletal’ muscles. These are made from bundles of individual muscle cells, each cell containing parallel bundles of protein filaments (myofibrils). Nerve impulses stimulate these cells to contract, exerting kinetic force on the part of the skeleton to which the muscle is attached and creating movement. The other main type of muscle is smooth muscle, which is not connected directly to the skeleton, but is a component of internal organs such as the reproductive system and the intestine. Smooth muscles typically contract in a phased manner, which creates a controlled wave of movement. The muscles that deliver the most force in the body are the uterine muscles, used when mammals give birth to live young. Muscle is also a major source of dietary protein for carnivorous animals, and to a large extent for omnivores (like us); eating roasted skeletal muscle is not something we usually think about when sitting down for dinner.

### RELATED TOPICS

See also  
REPRODUCTION: ANIMALS  
page 78

METABOLISM  
page 100

EXCRETION  
page 104

### 3-SECOND BIOGRAPHY

H.E. HUXLEY & A.F. HUXLEY  
1924–2013 & 1917–2012  
Brilliant English physiologists who made breakthrough advances in muscle and nerve biology

### 30-SECOND TEXT

Tim Richardson

*We rely on muscles not only to move around but to see, to speak, to smile or frown, to swallow and digest food – and to pump blood around the body.*



# CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

## the 30-second theory

Animal cells require a constant supply of nutrients and oxygen from the environment, and they produce waste products that are released back into the environment. Complex species with many cell layers have developed supply mechanisms that deliver nutrients to cells and remove waste, known as circulatory systems. These have three basic components: fluid (in the case of blood containing many cells), a pump (the heart) and a complex network of tubes or vessels. In insects, spiders and crustaceans the circulation is open and the fluid transported (haemolymph) bathes the tissues and their component cells, and is sucked back into the vessels during heart relaxation. In all vertebrates blood is confined to the vessels and is under pressure that surges as the heart beats. Mammals and birds possess a double circulation system: between the heart and the lungs; and between the heart and the rest of the body. This enables blood to travel to the lungs, release waste carbon dioxide and pick up oxygen, before returning to the heart, which then pumps the fuel-filled blood to the rest of the body through a network of arteries. Arteries divide into smaller and smaller vessels (capillaries) that permeate into all tissues, ensuring that every cell is close to the supply network. Blood returns to the heart through veins, and the cycle begins again.

### 3-SECOND DISSECTION

Circulatory systems across the animal kingdom supply cells with nutrients and oxygen and carry away the waste products of cell function.

### 3-MINUTE SYNTHESIS

Natural selection has enabled the development of mechanisms that protect the circulatory system, preventing the loss of blood. Damaged or broken blood vessels trigger the blood to clot, preventing further leakage, while blood flow in healthy vessels prevents blood clotting. Diseases of blood vessels, often caused by the accumulation of fatty deposits, can result in clotting inside vessels that in humans leads to heart attacks and strokes.

### RELATED TOPICS

See also  
RESPIRATION  
PAGE 94

METABOLISM  
page 100

NUTRITION  
page 102

EXCRETION  
page 104

### 3-SECOND BIOGRAPHY

WILLIAM HARVEY  
1578–1657

English physician who discovered the organization of the human circulatory system in 1628

### 30-SECOND TEXT

Jonathan Gibbins

*In our double circulation blood pumped from the heart to the lungs returns enriched with oxygen, then is distributed via the arteries before coming back via the veins.*





# INDEX

## A

adaptation 114  
ageing 106, 128  
AIDS 21  
algae 21, 22, 24, 26, 98, 113, 122  
allele 34, 40  
amino acids 34, 92, 102  
amoebae [7](#), 14, 22  
anaemia (iron deficiency) 102  
*Anatomy of Plants, The* 82  
animals [8](#), 18, 22, 24, 28, 30, 52,  
[66](#), [78](#), 87, 88, 92, 118, 126  
sense of 'self' 124  
Anthropocene [7](#)  
antibiotics 18, 24, 114  
antioxidants 128  
archaea 16, 22, 112, 122  
*Armillaria bulbosa* 24  
arteries [66](#)  
arthropods 28  
aspirin 26  
autonomic nervous system 62

## B

bacteria [8](#), 14, 18, 30, 53, 74, 98,  
104, 112, 114, 122, 124, 126, 132  
*Bacillus anthracis* 18  
*Clostridium tetani* 74  
*Escherichia coli* 74  
*Mycobacterium bovis* 132  
*Mycobacterium tuberculosis* 74  
beer 24  
bees 124  
beriberi (vitamin B1 deficiency)  
102  
biodiversity 92, 108, 132, 140,  
148  
bioethics 68, 86-87  
biofilms [12](#), 18, 72, 74  
biofuels 108  
biomedicine [6](#)  
biotech [12](#), 30, 68, 72  
birds [66](#), 113, 114, 124, 128  
Blackburn, Elizabeth 86-87  
Blaxter, Kenneth 100  
blood and circulation 52, [66](#), [84](#)  
Borlaug, Norman [8](#), 96-97  
bovine tuberculosis 132, 136  
bubonic plague 18

## C

cancer 42, 52, 56, 58, 59, 72, 73, 84,  
106  
cervical cancer 58, 59  
carbohydrates 92, 94, 102  
cats 28, 87, 88, 128  
cells [6](#), [12](#), 14, 16, 18, 22, 26, 28, 30,  
36, 42, 47, 52, 53, 54, 72, 82, 84,  
92, 94, 122, 128  
apoptosis 72, 84, 93, 106  
cell cycle 54  
cell division 54  
cell specialization 68, 82  
cellular senescence and ageing  
106  
diploid cell 72, 78, 82  
Hayflick limit 128  
stem cell 53, 68  
central nervous system 62  
cheese 18  
chimpanzees 124, 142-43  
chlorophyll 26, 80, 93  
chloroplast [12](#), 20, 22, 93, 98, 113  
choanoflagellates [12](#)  
cholera 18  
chromosome 34, 38, 52, 53, 54, 72,  
74, 87, 93, 106  
climate change, anthropogenic [6](#),  
132, 144  
cloning [12](#), 30, 52, 68  
coccolithophores 22  
comets 14  
conservation 133, 136, 143, 148  
rewilding 133, 148  
cows 28, 114, 118, 122  
crows 124  
crustaceans 28  
Curie, Marie 84  
cyanobacteria [12](#), 18, 21, 92, 98, 112,  
122  
cystic fibrosis 18, 74  
cytoplasm [12](#), 22, 36, 112

## D

Darwin, Charles 47, 73, 112, 113, 114,  
116, 120, 121, 126, 133  
*Descent of Man, The* 120, 121  
Dawkins, Richard 47  
dendrite 62

diatoms 22  
diploid 72, 78, 82  
DNA [12](#), 13, 14, 16, 21, 22, 30, 36,  
40, 42, 44, 52, 54, 72, 74, 84,  
88, 93, 106, 112, 126, 128, 148  
dogs 28, 87, 88, 118, 128  
Dolly the Sheep [12](#), 30, 72, 88  
dolphins 124  
Dutch elm disease 24

## E

Ebola 14  
ecosystem 132, 133, 146, 148  
elephant 124, 128  
Elton, Charles Sutherland 138, 146  
endosymbiosis 93  
energy security 108  
enzymes 30, 36, 54, 93, 122  
epidermal growth factor 56  
Epstein-Barr Virus 52  
ethanol 108  
eukaryote 13, 16, 22, 24, 52, 53, 54,  
112, 122, 126  
evolution [6](#), 114, 118, 126, 148  
extinction 136, 144, 148

## F

Fisher, Ronald A. 40, 47, 113, 116  
fitness 47  
inclusive 35, 47  
Fleming, Alexander 24  
food security 92, 108  
foraminiferans 22  
Ford, Henry 108  
fossil fuels 108, 132  
Franklin, Rosalind E. 36  
crustaceans 28  
fungi 22, 24, 112, 122, 126

## G

Gaia 21  
gamete 72, 78, 82  
genes and genetics [6](#)  
dominant gene 38  
epigenetics 42  
gene flow 40  
gene pool 72  
gene sequencing 18  
genetic drift 35, 40, 113

genetic modification 13, 30, 72,  
88  
genetic mutation 113  
genetic screening 48  
genetic testing 48  
genetic variation 78  
genome 13, 30, 34, 44, 47, 100,  
133  
genomics 133  
Mendelian genetics 38  
population genetics 40, 47  
recessive gene 38  
transgenic plant 73, 88  
unit of heredity 34, 93  
Glissmann, Lutz 59  
globalization 146  
GMOs: genetically modified  
organisms 30  
God 28, 121  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 80  
goitre (iodine deficiency) 102  
Goodall, Jane 124, 142-43  
greenhouse gases 108

## H

Haldane, J.B.S. 28, 40, 47  
Hamilton, Bill 46-47, 116  
hamster 128  
haploid cells 72, 78, 82  
Harvey, William [66](#)  
Hayflick, Leonard 128  
heart [66](#)  
helping behaviour 47  
HIV 14, 21, 47  
Hoffmann, Jules A. 60  
Hofmeister, Wilhelm 82  
hormone 52, 56, 100  
Hoyle, Fred 14  
Human Genome Project 44  
human papilloma virus (HPV) 53,  
58, 59  
hyphae 24

## I

immune system 53, 62, 68  
influenza 14, 146  
insects 28, [66](#), 118, 124  
insulin 52, 56

## K

Krebs, Hans 94, 100  
Kuhn, Werner 104

## L

Leeuwenhoek, Antonie van 18, 22  
leprosy 18  
Lewis, Edward 76  
Lind, James 102  
Linnaeus 26  
‘live fast, die young’ 128  
liver 54, 100  
Lovelock, James 21  
lungs 66  
lymphocyte 53, 60, 106

## M

macrophage 53, 60, 106  
malaria 22, 47  
Malthus, Thomas Robert 136  
mammals 28, 66, 72, 92, 128  
Margulis, Lynn 20–21, 22, 98, 122  
meiosis 53, 54  
Mendel, Gregor 38  
meningitis 18  
metabolism 18, 93, 100, 104, 128  
metabolome 35, 44, 93, 100  
methane 16, 104, 108  
microscope 14, 18, 22  
migration 35, 40, 113  
mimivirus 14  
minerals 102, 108, 122  
mitochondria 13, 21, 22, 92, 94, 122  
mitosis 52, 53, 54  
  post-mitosis 106  
molluscs 28  
mRNAs: messenger ribonucleic  
  acids 36  
mutation 35, 40  
mutualism 112, 118, 122

## N

natural selection 35, 40, 47, 66, 73,  
  78, 113, 114, 116, 120, 133  
nerves and nerve impulses 62, 64,  
  68  
neuron 62  
neurotransmitter 62  
neutrophil 60

nitrogen 18  
Nobel Peace Prize 1970 Norman  
  Borlaug 96–97  
Nobel Prize in chemistry 1961  
  Melvin Calvin 98  
Nobel prize in medicine  
  1933 Thomas [H. Morgan](#) 38  
  1978 Werner Arber, Hamilton  
  Smith, Daniel Nathans 30  
  1995 Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard  
  (with Edward Lewis and Eric  
  Wieschaus) 76  
  2008 Harald zur Hausen (with  
  Françoise Barré-Sinoussi and  
  Luc Montagnier) 58–59  
  2009 Elizabeth Blackburn (with  
  Carol Greider and Jack  
  Szostak) 86–87  
nucleus 13, 22, 88, 92, 112

## O

octopuses 124  
*On the Origin of the Species* 47,  
  120, 121, 126  
oxygen 18

## P

pancreas 52, 56  
pandoravirus 14  
*Paramecium* 22  
parasites and parasitism 112, 114,  
  116, 118  
Pasteur, Louis 14  
Pauling, Linus 126  
penguins 126  
penicillin 24  
photosynthesis 13, 21, 26, 73, 80,  
  92, 93, 98, 100, 102, 104, 112,  
  122, 140  
pigs 28  
plants 8, 18, 22, 24, 26, 30, 52, 80,  
  82, 92, 98, 102, 108, 113, 118, 122,  
  124, 132, 140  
plasmids 74  
pollination 26, 118  
population genetics 40, 47  
predators and predation  
  food webs 138  
  gazelles and cheetahs 118, 124

prokaryote 13, 16, 22, 52, 112, 122  
proteins 35, 36, 42, 44, 52, 54, 64,  
  92, 94, 100  
proteobacteria 21  
proteome 35, 44  
protist 13, 18, 21, 22, 113, 126

## R

rabies 14  
radioactivity 84  
radiolarians 22  
radiotherapy 73, 84  
rainforest 140  
reproduction 14, 24, 26, 52, 53, 54,  
  62, 64, 72, 76, 78, 82, 112, 128  
ribosomes 36  
rickets 93, 102  
RNA 13, 14, 35, 36, 42, 53, 73, 93  
Royal Society 46

## S

Sagan, Carl 20  
Sanger, Frederick 44, 87  
scurvy 93, 102  
seaweed 22  
selection 40  
*Selfish Gene, The* 47  
sexual selection 113, 116  
Shakespeare, William 144  
sheep 28  
sickle-cell anaemia 40  
skeleton 64  
sleeping sickness 22  
slime mould 22  
smallpox 14  
space 14  
species 24, 26, 28, 35, 40, 112, 113,  
  114, 118, 132  
  biotic homogenization 132, 146  
  endangered species 133  
  family tree 126  
  invasive species 146  
  speciation 113, 114  
  species distribution 134  
  species extinction 136, 144, 148  
  species relocation 148  
spiders 28  
spine and spinal cord 62, 68  
spore 13, 24, 26, 74

starfish 28  
stromatolites 18  
symbiogenesis 13, 20, 21, 122  
symbiosis 93  
synapse 62  
syphilis 18

## T

tapeworm 112  
telomere and telomerase 86–87  
tetanus 74  
*Trypanosoma* 22  
tuberculosis 18, 74  
tumour 73, 84

## V

vaccination 53, 59, 60  
veins 66  
Villiers, Ethel Michele de 59  
virus 14, 30, 53, 87, 106, 146  
vitamins 93, 102, 128

## W

Wallace, Alfred Russel 121, 134  
warnowid dinoflagellates 22  
Watson, James and Crick,  
  Francis 36  
wheat  
  dwarf wheat 92, 96, 97  
wine 24  
wolves 133  
worms 28  
Wright, Sewall G. 40, 47

## Y

yeasts 22, 24  
yoghurt 18