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This Week

- 340 Wash-Resistant Bacteria Taint Foods
Janet Raloff
- 340 Coral helps explain El Niño oddities
Richard Monastersky
- 341 Novel bacteria have a taste for aluminum
John Travis
- 341 Analysis shatters cathedral glass myth
Corinna Wu
- 342 Solar flare triggers energetic sunquake
Ron Cowen
- 342 Cold molecules make long-awaited debut
Peter Weiss
- 343 Anticholesterol drugs work in healthy folks
Nathan Seppa
- 343 Australian site jumps forward in time
Bruce Bower
- 343 Romantic display gets tree planted
Susan Milius

Articles

- 345 Stealth, Lies, and Cowbirds
One of the most despised birds in North America is puzzling researchers
Susan Milius

Letters

On the nature of tides

"Tree trunks swell in synchrony with tides" (SN: 4/18/98, p. 245) misstates the basic properties of tides. First, full and new phases of the moon produce the same effect—stronger, or spring, tides. Second, tides by their very nature are large-scale phenomena. The smaller the size of the object considered, the less relevant tides are.

It is perfectly reasonable that trees growing in a tidal swamp would swell or shrink in rhythm with the amount of water surrounding them, but the idea that tidal forces work directly on such small objects is untenable.

Donald E. Hall
Professor of Physics and Astronomy
California State University
Sacramento, Calif.

Whys and wheres of bony growths

It would appear that the primary reason for calcified buildup in and around heart valves is the unidirectional flow of the blood through the cardiac chambers and the open-

ing and closing mechanism of the valves ("Bony growths found in heart valves," SN: 4/4/98, p. 212).

When a valve shuts, calcium and other impurities accumulate at the opening. Because the flow is in one direction only, no shearing stresses from reverse flow are available to counteract residue buildup.

Robert A. Shannon
Oregon, Ohio

To add to the interesting observation of bone forming in calcified heart valves, we have occasionally seen bone forming in the calcified plaques formed in atherosclerosis. Of even greater interest is the rare observation of hematopoietic bone marrow forming in such sites. We presume this arises from circulating stem cells.

S.M. Baird
Professor of Clinical Pathology
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San Diego, Calif.

Cutting protons a little slack

The nuclear barrier penetration, or tunneling, by a proton when it is ejected from a

nucleus doesn't have much to do with coming from "deep inside" the nucleus and "penetrating a surface shell of protons" ("Deformed Nuclei Spit Out Protons," SN: 3/7/98, p. 148). Rather, it has to do with the energy barrier caused by the very short range and very strong attractive nuclear force that tends to keep the neutrons and protons together inside the nucleus, as well as with the much weaker but long-range electrostatic repulsion that tends to push the proton away from the nucleus.

If the rules of classical mechanics applied, the proton could never escape the powerful nuclear force. However, if some energy could be "borrowed" for an instant to move a proton a tiny distance away from the nucleus, electrostatic repulsion would take over and accelerate the proton away from the nucleus.

Provided the energy imbalance is corrected very quickly, quantum mechanics provides such a loophole in the energy conservation law, and this is the "tunnel" referred to in nuclear barrier penetration.

Peter Thieberger
Brookhaven National Laboratory
Upton, N.Y.

- 348 Soya-nara, Heart Disease
The United States' top-selling legume gains heartfelt respect
Janet Raloff

Research Notes

- 344 Astronomy
Living with lambda
- 344 Biology
What good can nectar do a fern?
Monk seal killer may be misidentified
- 351 Materials Science
Empty virus acts as crystal container
Heat reveals invisible images in gels
- 351 Paleontology
Dinosaurs kept warm in the polar chill
A sea turtle's salty tale

Departments

- 338 Science News Books
- 339 Letters



Cover: Enriching the diet with soy-derived foods, like the tofu salad shown here, can reduce the risk of heart disease—even among people with cholesterol in the fairly normal range, new studies show. For those who eschew tofu, some of the most effective of these heart-healthy foods—from novel margarines to chocolate-flavored shakes—disguise their soy origins. **Page 348**
(Credit: United Soybean Board)

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