# Exploring curious cures in medieval medicine at Cambridge University Library



A new exhibition at Cambridge University Library offers a deep dive into the medical practices of the Middle Ages, presenting a range of peculiar and unconventional treatments that might surprise modern audiences. Titled "Curious Cures: Medicine In The Medieval World," the exhibition showcases over 180 manuscripts primarily from the 14th and 15th centuries, featuring an array of medical recipes, surgical diagrams, and guides on healthy living.

Curated by Dr James Freeman, the exhibition aims to provide insight into the medical thought processes of the time, which, contrary to popular belief, went beyond mere superstition and trial-and-error. Dr Freeman explains to The Independent that medieval medicine “wasn’t simply superstition or blind trial-and-error.” He emphasises that practitioners had elaborate and sophisticated ideas about human anatomy and the influence of the surrounding world, including astrological elements.

One of the more eye-catching remedies featured in the exhibition is a 15th-century suggestion for addressing infertility through a rather unusual treatment involving weasel testicles. The manuscript instructs: “Take three or four weasel testicles and half a handful of young mouse-ear [chickweed] and burn it all equally in an earthenware pot. Afterwards, grind and combine with the juice of the aforementioned herb, and thus make soft pills in the manner of a hazelnut kernel, and place them so deeply in the private parts that they touch the uterus.” After a three-day period of abstinence from intercourse, the remedy asserts that conception will follow.

Another fascinating aspect of the exhibition is the examination of the interplay between medicine and astrology, highlighted by the “Zodiac Man” illustrations, which depict various body parts linked to specific star signs. Additionally, visitors will find wince-inducing surgical diagrams and other manuscripts providing insights into medieval theories surrounding ailments that modern medicine still addresses today.

The exhibition also showcases historical figures like Elizabeth of York, whose richly illuminated manuscript contains health guidance from a personal physician, alongside common recipes using herbs accessible to the less affluent. Dr Freeman noted that these manuscripts portray a medical world where various practitioners existed, including not only learned physicians but also monks, apothecaries, midwives, and lay healers, both men and women.

The "Curious Cures" exhibition opens to the public on March 29 and runs until December 6, with pre-booking required for a visit. With a goal to foster understanding of the past's medicinal practices, the exhibition invites attendees to engage with a time when the boundaries of healing were drawn from a complex mixture of observation, experience, and belief.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/stories/year-ahead-2025> - Corroborates the existence and details of the 'Curious Cures: Medicine in the Medieval World' exhibition at Cambridge University Library, highlighting its focus on medieval medical texts and manuscripts.
* <https://www.festival.cam.ac.uk/events/curious-cures-public-exhibition-opening> - Provides information about the public exhibition opening of 'Curious Cures' and invites the public to explore medieval medicine through manuscripts and historical practices.
* <https://www.festival.cam.ac.uk/events/exhibition-curious-cures-medicine-medieval-world> - Supports the exhibition's running dates and the requirement for booking, while also detailing the exploration of medieval medical practices and their complex interplay with astrology and herbal remedies.
* <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/curious-cures> - Unfortunately, this URL was not found in the search results, but it would ideally support specific claims about the exhibition's curator and the medical thought processes of medieval practitioners.
* <https://www.independent.co.uk/> - This link is a general news source and would ideally contain an interview with Dr. James Freeman, providing insight into his views on medieval medical practices and their sophistication.
* <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/early-manuscripts-and-rare-books> - This would support claims about the manuscripts held by Cambridge University Library, including their age and diversity, but it was not directly mentioned in the search results.