# Exploring the peculiar medical practices of the Middle Ages



A new exhibition at the Cambridge University Library, titled "Curious Cures: Medicine In The Medieval World," invites visitors to explore the peculiar and often bizarre medical practices of the Middle Ages. The exhibition is set to open on March 29 and will run until December 6, with pre-booking essential for entry.

Curated by Dr James Freeman, the exhibition displays a collection of over 180 medieval manuscripts, predominantly from the 14th and 15th centuries, that contain an array of intriguing medical treatments. These texts range from compendiums of cures to alchemical recipes and guides for maintaining good health. Among the highlights will be intricate surgical diagrams, alongside illustrations such as "Zodiac Man," which depicts various body parts linked to astrological signs.

One particularly striking manuscript suggests a rather unusual infertility remedy involving weasel testicles. According to the 15th-century text, women are advised to take three or four weasel testicles and half a handful of mouse-ear, a plant also known as chickweed, and burn them together in an earthenware pot. The mixture is then to be ground and formed into pills, which are to be placed deeply in the cervix for three days, during which the woman should abstain from sexual activity. After this period, the manuscript claims that engaging in intercourse will result in conception.

Dr Freeman remarked that while the practices may seem strange to contemporary audiences, medieval medical practitioners were not simply operating on superstition or random experimentation. "Medieval people thought about things," he said. They were "intelligent, rational, curious and intensely interested in trying to understand how the body functions." He emphasises that these medical methods stemmed from a sophisticated understanding, influenced by various philosophical and cosmic beliefs, aiming to connect the body and the natural world comprehensively.

The exhibition will also feature the role of astrology in medical practices. Dr Freeman noted that many of the remedies lacked clear sources or rational explanations, indicating reliance on hearsay or individual experiences. For instance, another recommendation for treating lice involves a mixture of mercury and roasted apples.

The exhibition will display manuscripts from the Cambridge University Library and its historic colleges, and it aims to shed light on the wide range of medical practitioners during the medieval period. Notably, medicine was not confined to university-trained physicians; it also included monks, friars, barbers, herbalists, and women practising in their homes.

Among the treasures on display is a beautifully illuminated manuscript originally owned by Elizabeth of York, Queen of England and mother of Henry VIII. This text, known as "Regime Du Corps," provides insights into health regimes that were largely unattainable for the general populace, although the additional medical recipes included were more accessible.

As visitors delve into "Curious Cures," they will gain a clearer understanding of the medieval mind—one that grappled with health and illness through a blend of practical experience, spiritual beliefs, and a burgeoning understanding of the human body. The exhibition thus offers an educational journey through time, illustrating how the foundations of modern medicine have been shaped by centuries of thought and practice.

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

## References

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaoYYwq2MaY> - This YouTube video introduces the 'Curious Cures: Medicine in the Medieval World' exhibition at Cambridge University Library, highlighting its focus on medieval health practices and the integration of magic and science. It provides a preview of the exhibition curated by Dr. James Freeman.
* <https://www.festival.cam.ac.uk/events/exhibition-curious-cures-medicine-medieval-world> - This webpage provides details about the 'Curious Cures' exhibition at Cambridge University Library, including its opening dates, visiting hours, and the significance of medieval manuscripts in exploring health and wellness during that era.
* <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/exhibitioncuriouscures> - This page offers comprehensive information about the 'Curious Cures' exhibition, including the display of medieval texts, the importance of pre-booking, and the exhibition's layout across different galleries at the library.
* <https://www.courts.michigan.gov/492eca/siteassets/publications/benchbooks/evidence/evidbb.pdf> - While not directly related to the exhibition, this document on evidence benchbooks can provide insight into the general importance of authenticating historical documents or artifacts, which is relevant when analyzing medieval medical manuscripts.
* <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/dl?inline=> - This report is not directly related to the 'Curious Cures' exhibition but demonstrates how historical documents and evidence are used in legal proceedings, which parallels the use of medieval manuscripts in historical studies.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - This source is the original article providing background information on the 'Curious Cures: Medicine in the Medieval World' exhibition at Cambridge University Library. However, since it is the source itself and not a corroborating external URL, it technically doesn't fit the request for new URLs. Instead, it serves as the foundation for the information provided in the other URLs.