

CLARITY GUIDES

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THE WORD · THE SPIRIT · THE EVIDENCE · SCOTLAND

ALCOHOL & THE SPIRIT

*From al-kuhl to “spirits”: what the world’s traditions believe,
what the science shows, and how to cut down*



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Preview – full guide coming soon – goclarity.uk

ABOUT THIS GUIDE



We call strong drinks “spirits”. The word “alcohol” comes from Arabic. And almost every religion and spiritual tradition on Earth has something to say about what drink does to the human spirit. This guide follows those threads, and then looks honestly at what the science says.

It starts with the **word**: how *al-kuhl*, a fine black eye powder, became the name for the strongest part of wine, and why drinks came to be called spirits. We check a popular claim that “alcohol” really means a **body-eating spirit**, and tell you what the dictionaries actually say.

Next come the **beliefs**: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga, Judaism and Christianity, Sikhism and other faiths, Indigenous peoples and the colonial history of alcohol, modern esoteric ideas about the aura and the energy body, and the famous letter in which the psychiatrist Carl Jung told the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous that the answer to *spiritus* was *spiritus*.

Then the **evidence**: units, guidelines, what alcohol does to the brain, sleep, mood, liver and heart, the cancer link, and Scotland’s own figures and laws. The last part is **practical**: cutting down, going alcohol-free, a 30-day plan, and where to get help in Fife and across Scotland.

Our labels. **RECORD** means something we can show from a law, an official document, a dictionary or a published study. **LEGEND** means a story, belief or popular claim that cannot be checked. **MODERN** means a modern idea, product or theory. Spiritual and religious views are described respectfully as **beliefs**, held sincerely by millions of people, not as proven facts. Paired boxes headed **What people report** and **What the evidence says** show where they meet and where they differ.

Not medical advice. This guide is for general information only. If you drink heavily every day, **do not stop suddenly without medical help**: alcohol withdrawal can cause seizures and can be life-threatening (chapter 19). Speak to your GP, call Drinkline on **0800 7 314 314**, or in an emergency call **999**.

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THE WORD

AL-KUHL: FROM EYE POWDER TO “ALCOHOL”

The word in every bottle shop began life as the name of a fine black powder that people in Egypt and the Middle East painted around their eyes.

RECORD **Kohl** is a dark eye cosmetic used in ancient Egypt for thousands of years and still worn today across North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. It was made by grinding minerals, usually **galena** (lead sulphide) or **stibnite** (antimony sulphide), into an extremely fine powder.

RECORD In Arabic the word is *kuhl*, from a root *k-h-l* meaning “to stain” or “to paint” the eyes. With the Arabic word for “the” in front, it becomes **al-kuhl**. The Oxford English Dictionary links it to the same root as the Hebrew *kāḥal* and the ancient Akkadian *guḫlu*, “antimony”.

✦ HOW A POWDER BECAME A LIQUID

RECORD Medieval European scholars learned much of their chemistry from Arabic books, which were translated into Latin from the 12th century. Latin writers borrowed *alcohol* (also spelled *alcool* or *alcofol*) to mean kohl, and then any **very fine powder**, the purest, most refined form of a substance.

RECORD The Swiss physician and alchemist **Paracelsus** (1493–1541) took the next step. He used *alcohol* both for a fine powder and for the most refined part of a liquid. The OED records the phrase **alcohol vini**, “the alcohol of wine”, in his writings: the pure essence you get when you distil wine.

RECORD In English, “alcohol” first meant a fine powder (1540s). By the 1670s it meant “the pure spirit of anything”. Only by about **1753** did it mean, on its own, the intoxicating part of drinks, as short for “alcohol of wine”. Chemists widened it in the early 1800s to a whole family of compounds; the one we drink is **ethanol**.



A glass kohl tube with its applicator stick, ancient Egypt. Museo Egizio, Turin. CCo.

Sources: Oxford English Dictionary, “alcohol, n.” and “kohl, n.”; Online Etymology Dictionary, “alcohol”; Merriam-Webster; Museo Egizio, Turin, object S 8489.