

Some Surprising Uses for Awamori

There is an old Japanese saying: “Alcohol is the best medicine.” During the Edo period (1603–1868), Awamori was the strongest alcohol available and had various medicinal and practical uses. Because it could disinfect children’s cuts and grazes, it was sometimes included in the “tool kit” given to new brides. It was also used to help clear the chest, get rid of phlegm, prevent chills, kill roundworms, treat bloodshot eyes, and improve the passing of urine.

From the second half of the seventeenth century, samurai not only enjoyed awamori as a drink but also used it to disinfect sword cuts. It is recorded that when their awamori ration ran out, samurai resorted to drinking a spirit distilled from sake lees.

In Okinawa, it was believed that the smell of awamori could ward off illness. People, therefore, applied awamori to their face and fingertips during smallpox and other epidemics, and some, including women and children, drank it as medicine. When disease was endemic, visitors might be offered a cup of awamori instead of tea. The awamori used in Okinawan religious ceremonies is sometimes referred to as *gushi*, a term that some linguists suggest has a shared root with *kusuri*, the Japanese word for medicine.