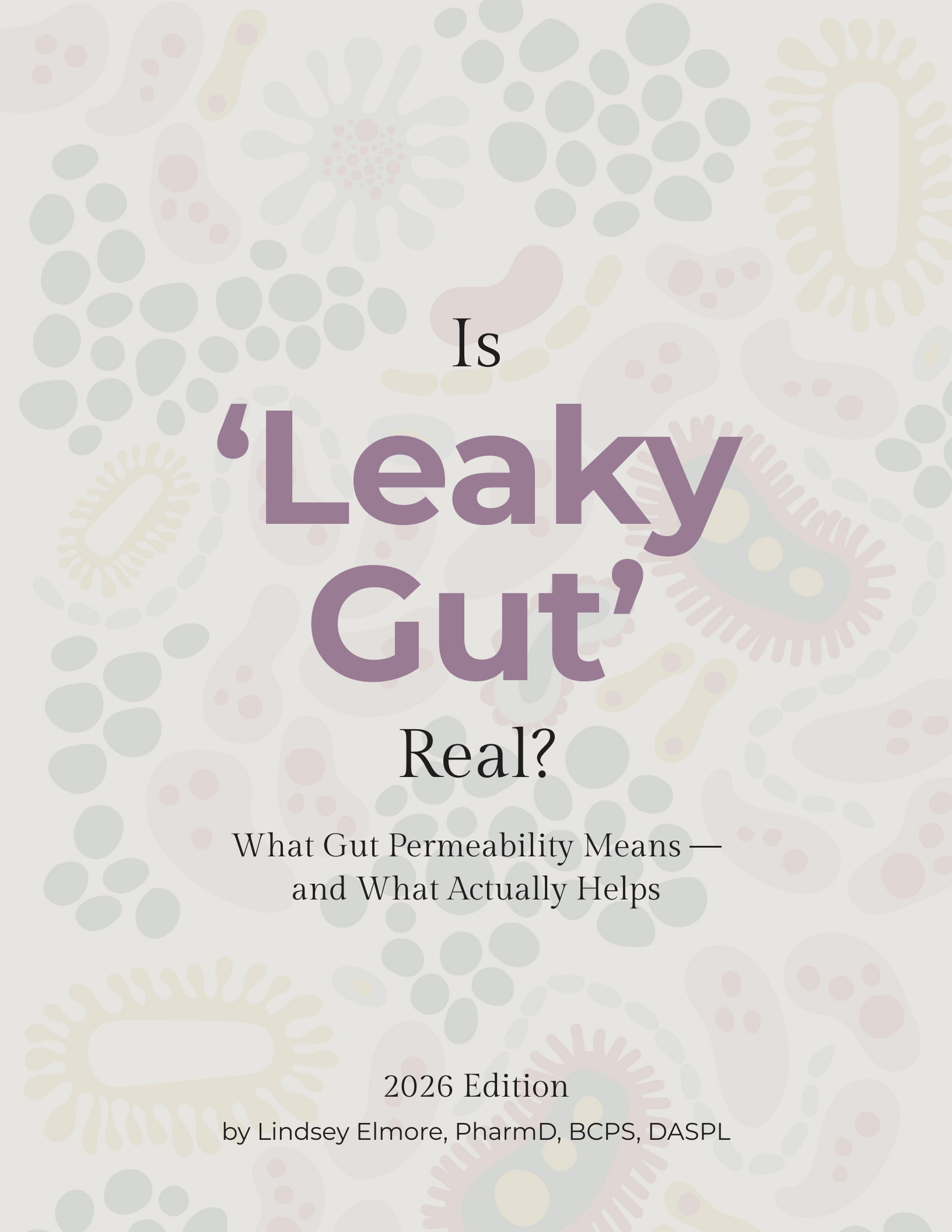




Is **‘Leaky Gut’** Real?

What Gut Permeability Means —
and What Actually Helps

2026 Edition

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Is ‘Leaky Gut’ Real?

The honest answer

Let’s start with the part nobody selling you a gut cleanse wants to say out loud.

“Leaky gut” is a nickname. The science term is *increased intestinal permeability*: a gut lining that lets more through than it should.¹

That part is real. Your intestines are lined with a single layer of cells, sealed together by tight junctions. When that seal loosens, things that should stay in your gut can slip into the tissue underneath.^{2,3}

Researchers can measure it, and it clearly shows up in celiac disease and Crohn’s disease, and in some people with IBS.^{1,2}

It can also be pushed around by everyday things: anti-inflammatory painkillers like ibuprofen, heavy alcohol, very hard endurance exercise, and even stress.^{2,3} In one study, just having to give a public speech made healthy volunteers’ guts measurably leakier.⁴

Here’s what isn’t established. “Leaky gut syndrome” is not a recognized medical diagnosis.¹ Whether a leaky gut *causes* problems outside the gut, like fatigue, weight gain, or hormone trouble, is still unproven in people.^{2,3} And no one has shown that tightening the barrier by itself cures any disease.³

I used to teach a five-step plan to “heal leaky gut.” When I went back to the research, the plan had never been tested as a whole. Some of its steps hold up. Some don’t. A few can hurt.

So this guide is the honest version: what it is, how it’s tested, when to see a doctor, and what actually helps.

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Can you test for it?

Short answer: not with anything you can order online.

The research test. Scientists have you drink two sugars, one small enough to pass through a healthy lining and one that shouldn't, then measure them in your urine.³ It's useful in studies. It isn't a standard clinical test.^{1,5}

Zonulin blood tests. Zonulin is a real protein that helps open the gut's tight junctions. But when researchers checked the most widely used commercial zonulin kit, it wasn't measuring zonulin at all. It was picking up other proteins.^{6,7}

IgG “food sensitivity” panels. These measure antibodies your body makes simply because you've eaten a food. That's usually a sign of tolerance, not trouble.⁸ Allergy societies advise against using them to decide what to cut out.^{8,9}

What is worth testing: celiac disease, anemia, inflammation markers, and a stool test when diarrhea won't quit. Those tests find things that can be treated.¹⁰⁻¹²

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See your doctor first if...

Gut symptoms are common, and most aren’t dangerous. But some need a real workup before you change your diet or buy anything.

Get tested for celiac disease before you cut out gluten. The blood test only works while you’re still eating gluten, so going gluten-free first can hide it.¹² If you have IBS with diarrhea, ask for this test.¹⁰

See a doctor promptly if you have:

- ☐ blood in your stool, or black, tarry stools^{10,11}
- ☐ weight loss you can’t explain^{11,13}
- ☐ anemia or low iron¹¹
- ☐ diarrhea that wakes you up at night¹³
- ☐ pain or diarrhea that keeps getting worse¹³
- ☐ fever with gut symptoms¹³
- ☐ a family history of Crohn’s, ulcerative colitis, celiac disease, or colon cancer^{10,11}
- ☐ new bowel changes after age 45, or if you’re due for colon cancer screening^{10,14}

These can be signs of inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, or other conditions that need real treatment, not a cleanse. A stool calprotectin test can help tell IBS from IBD.¹⁰

And please don’t stop a prescribed medicine on your own, even one you suspect is bothering your gut. Bring it up with the person who prescribed it.

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The 5Rs, re-checked

The 5Rs is a five-step gut framework. It has never been tested as a whole, but some of its steps have been. Here’s what holds up.

The R	The old idea	What the research actually shows
Remove	<i>Cut out gluten, dairy, GMOs, sugar, coffee and more</i>	Remove what’s <i>proven</i> for you: gluten if you have celiac disease, lactose if you’re intolerant, regular NSAIDs and heavy alcohol for everyone. Broad elimination isn’t supported and has real downsides. ^{3,15}
Replace	<i>Take acid, enzymes and vitamins</i>	Only replace what a test shows is low. Prescription enzymes help people whose pancreas can’t make enough. ¹⁶
Repopulate	<i>Probiotics are a must</i>	Food first. Probiotics help in a few specific situations, not most gut problems. ^{17,18}
Repair	<i>Glutamine, collagen, aloe, slippery elm</i>	Glutamine helped one well-defined group. The rest haven’t been tested for this. ^{19,20}
Rebalance	<i>Stress wrecks your gut</i>	Mostly true, and fixable. Stress makes the gut leakier, and gut-directed therapy helps IBS. ^{4,10}

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Remove, done right

- **Go easy on NSAIDs.** Ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin make the gut lining leakier.^{3,4} If you take them most days, ask your doctor about other options.
- **Cut back on alcohol.**^{2,3}
- **Don’t cut a dozen foods at once.** Big elimination diets aren’t backed by evidence for gut repair.³ They can leave you short on calcium, fiber, and other nutrients, and they can quietly turn eating into a source of anxiety.
- **Test one suspect at a time.** Keep a simple food-and-symptom log for two weeks and bring it to your doctor or a registered dietitian.
- **If you have IBS,** ask about a *short* low-FODMAP trial with a dietitian. It has the best evidence of any IBS diet.¹⁰ The “reintroduce” part matters, because staying strict long-term can shrink some helpful bacteria.²¹
- **If milk bothers you,** try lactose-free dairy or a lactase pill before giving up dairy altogether.
- **If diarrhea started after travel or has lasted weeks,** ask for a stool test instead of a parasite cleanse.

Replace, done right

- **Replace what’s actually low.** Gut conditions can drain iron, B12, vitamin D, and others.²²⁻²⁴ A blood test tells you which. More isn’t better: extra iron and zinc can cause harm of their own.^{25,26}
- **Enzymes:** if you have greasy, floating stools or unexplained weight loss, ask about a stool test for pancreatic function. The treatment is a prescription enzyme, not a supplement-aisle blend.¹⁶
- **Stomach acid supplements (betaine HCl):** skip them unless your doctor recommends them. They can burn the stomach lining, anyone with ulcers or heartburn should see a doctor first, and they shouldn’t be taken with NSAIDs or steroids.²⁷

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Repopulate: feed the bacteria you already have

- **Eat more plants.** Aim for a wide variety of vegetables, fruit, beans, whole grains, nuts, and seeds.
- **Add fermented foods.** In a Stanford trial, people who worked up to about six servings a day of yogurt, kefir, kimchi, and similar foods had more diverse gut bacteria and lower inflammation markers after 10 weeks.¹⁸
- **Go slowly with onion, garlic, leeks, and artichokes if you have IBS.** They're great prebiotic foods, and also common bloating triggers.²⁸
- **Probiotic supplements** help in specific cases, like preventing *C. diff* diarrhea while you're on antibiotics. For most gut problems, the major gastroenterology guideline doesn't recommend them.¹⁷ If you try one, choose the exact strain studied for your problem.¹⁷

Repair: what the research actually shows

- **Glutamine** fuels the cells lining your gut. In one trial of people whose IBS started after a stomach bug and whose gut tested leaky, 5 grams three times a day for 8 weeks improved symptoms and tightened the barrier.¹⁹ Across other groups, glutamine hasn't changed gut permeability.²⁰
- **Collagen, slippery elm, arginine, aloe:** not tested for this. Skip oral aloe in particular.²⁹

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Rebalance: calm the gut-brain connection

- **Stress is real gut biology.** Acute stress makes the gut leakier through stress hormones and immune cells.⁴
- **Gut-directed therapy works.** CBT and gut-directed hypnotherapy are suggested for IBS.¹⁰
- **Protect sleep:** a steady wake time, morning light, and caffeine before noon.
- **Move most days,** just not to the point of exhaustion. Extreme endurance exercise itself raises permeability.³

Before you buy a gut supplement

Ask three questions. Was *this exact product* tested in people? Did the test measure something you care about, not just a lab marker? And does it interact with anything you take?

Antidepressants plus 5-HTP, and anything plus ashwagandha, are worth a pharmacist conversation first.^{30,31}

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