

# Leaky Gut Syndrome

## **Leaky gut syndrome — how healing your digestive tract promotes total wellness**

Molly had been lactose-intolerant for many years before having children. Surprisingly, she went through two pregnancies completely able to digest dairy foods, and thought she'd overcome whatever the problem was — until faced with a newborn who had nursing difficulties, a two-year-old, and a full-time job. Suddenly it seemed like everything she ate gave her bloating, gas, and eventual diarrhea. She was tired, irritable, unable to exercise — and running frequently to the bathroom. As she relayed her story, it sounded a lot like leaky gut to me.

As I explained to Molly, leaky gut syndrome is a digestive disorder that is not yet fully understood, especially in conventional medicine. But clearing it up is a top priority if you want to maintain your health. As it turned out, Molly's leaky gut caused foods that ordinarily were fine for her to wreak havoc on her system. With a little extra help Molly was able to heal her gut and come back to enjoying nearly all her favorite foods — without the embarrassing symptoms!

Most people do not understand that digestion is absolutely the foundation of our health. Because of the way our bodies are connected, inflammation in the gut can eventually lead to inflammation in the bones, heart, brain, or beyond, making osteoporosis, heart disease, Alzheimer's, or other diseases you may have a genetic predisposition for more likely as you age. I was refreshed by Molly's determination to get to the bottom of her digestive health. Her health will benefit.

Let's take a look at leaky gut syndrome, and how you can resolve it naturally.

Along the lining of healthy intestines, cells are sealed together by what are known as tight junctions. These junctions are the gatekeepers that allow or bar particles from the gut's interior to move into the body's circulatory system. When your intestinal lining is compromised, particles can "leak" inappropriately through these cells and their junctions, and pass into the bloodstream or lymphatic system. These particles may be incompletely digested chunks of food, or microbes, or wastes, toxins, and even antigens and pathogens.

The leaking of these particles alerts your body that something is wrong, and your immune system tries to come to the rescue by igniting inflammation. As inflammation increases, the layer of beneficial bacterial colonies lining the intestines decreases, which only makes the problem worse.

I have two major concerns with leaky gut: one is the inability for women to digest and absorb food and nutrients properly. And the other is a compromised immune system, which is the source of most of the symptoms women feel with leaky gut. Your gut plays a crucial role in immune function because it contains special areas called gut-associated lymphatic tissue (GALT) that protect you from allergy-causing food antigens and disease-carrying microbes. With leaky gut, these and other harmful substances can gain access to your blood stream and travel far and wide throughout the body.

While women so often come to see me at Women to Women for other reasons, I find 85% of my patients have a digestive imbalance. Molly and I discussed the potential preexisting conditions and events most commonly associated with leaky gut. Upon reflection, most women can pinpoint the time they first noticed a change in their digestion. With Molly, this was soon after the birth of her baby girl.

In reality, anything that damages the mucosal lining of the GI tract can contribute to leaky gut. Molly's problem likely originated with a lactose intolerance that had quietly simmered away for years, but which came to a rolling boil in response to her growing responsibilities.

It bears mention that certain medications, treatments, and conditions can damage the lining of your gut. Antibiotics are one of the biggest offenders, because they annihilate your friendly gut flora. Radiation, chemotherapy, steroid drugs (corticosteroids), aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, other NSAID's, as especially antibiotics can all increase intestinal permeability. Leaky gut may also show up along with parasites, Crohn's disease, celiac disease, inflammatory bowel disease, and irritable bowel syndrome that is traced to food intolerance.

I've often said that the gut is the key to overall health, and this statement becomes very clear with leaky gut. Not only can leaky gut lead to food sensitivities and allergies, which I explain below, but an abundance of toxins in the system can burden the liver and also lead to chronic inflammation. Inflammation has the potential to be linked to a whole host of disorders, including chronic fatigue syndrome, heart failure, depression, multiple sclerosis, lupus, vasculitis, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, osteoporosis, and more.

Here's the scoop on leaky gut and food allergies. With leaky gut syndrome, your body is caught in a self-perpetuating, semi-infectious, inflammatory state. If your immune system is continually being stimulated by specific food antigens that are leaking into circulation, and you continue to consume those foods, you could easily develop an allergic response or sensitivity to those foods. Your immune system remembers those foods as triggers, and calls up the same inflammatory reaction at each re-encounter. This is what happened for Molly with dairy, and, as the intestinal lining failed to heal, yeast and eggs became a problem as well.

The Institute of Functional Medicine developed the Four "R" Program as a digestive tool for practitioners. We've developed our own Four R plan based on this approach.

**Remove:** Undertake an elimination diet. To stabilize and soothe the digestive tract, I recommend a 14-day (or lengthier) Elimination diet. This is a gentle approach that frees you of common allergens, such as gluten, dairy, soy, and other disruptive foods. We offer a Digestive Reset Program that guides you through an elimination diet, while offering support with probiotics, glutamine, and advice from our Wellness Coaches. This diet can also help you to pinpoint which foods are contributing to or causing your symptoms.

**Reinoculate:** Rebalance your gut flora. As I mentioned before, establishing microfloral balance throughout the GI tract is crucial for good digestion because the organisms colonizing our gut help us digest and absorb our food, and keep the unfriendly bugs out. A well-formulated probiotic supplement like Women to Women's Super Biotic has helped many women stabilize digestion. While fiber is the favorite food of friendly flora, it may be difficult to tolerate lots of it early on with leaky gut. You can start by eating softer foods like bananas, pears, applesauce, well-cooked squash, and so on, building your way up to more fibrous fruits and veggies.

**Repair:** Rebuild your intestinal cells. Ongoing research continues to unveil ways to support the naturally rapid cell-turnover that makes for quickly healing the gut. You may wish to consider glutamine, methionine and N-acetyl cysteine, larch, kiwifruit, and zinc to advance your healing. Glutamine has been found particularly helpful for maintaining the structure and function of the intestine. For example, glutamine has been shown to improve damage done to the gut mucosa from radiation and chemotherapy. And we offer glutamine as part of our Digestive Reset Program.

**Regulate.** Continue to avoid anything you notice to cause GI upset. Digestion starts with the enzymes in

your saliva, so take the time to sit down and chew your food thoroughly. Taking the time to enjoy your meal in a relaxed setting without rushing also enhances levels of secretory IgA, an important factor for body-wide immune health.

Instead of living with uncomfortable symptoms, empower yourself with information about leaky gut and take the first steps to heal your gut naturally. As Molly reminded me, having digestive problems is not only embarrassing, but isolating. At times you may feel like you can't go out to dinner or even visit a friend's house for fear of having to run to the bathroom. But rest assured, you will get back to those activities once your gut has healed. And I promise, every bite will be worth the work you did to heal!

## Buckwheat for Your Belly

If you're looking for a simple, yet healthy breakfast that is easy to digest, experiment with cream of buckwheat (also known as buckwheat grits). Depending on your taste, you can cook these into a sweet or savory breakfast in no time!

### Sweet Cream of Buckwheat

Cut one pear or apple into thin slices

Sautee fruit slices in coconut oil until soft and turning brown

Sprinkle with cinnamon and nutmeg

Add ¼ cup of buckwheat grits and be sure to cover them in oil and fruit juice before adding water

Add 1 ¼ cups of water

Cook covered until grits are soft (about 20 minutes) and top with walnuts or almonds

Optional: add 1 tbsp Greek yogurt plus a teaspoon of stevia or honey

### Savory Cream of Buckwheat

Sautee 1 garlic bulb (chopped), ½ medium sized onion (sliced thinly), and a cup of chopped mushrooms until mushrooms have released their juices and the onions are soft

Add ¼ cup of buckwheat grits and mix in with vegetables and oil

Add 1 ¼ cups of water and cook grits until soft (about 20 minutes)

Stir in a handful of baby spinach until wilted

Top with ¼ cup of chopped almonds

Add salt and pepper to taste