NIOSH

Latex Allergy

A Prevention Guide

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Public Health Service
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

CDC
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Latex gloves have proved effective in preventing transmission of many infectious diseases to health care workers. But for some workers, exposures to latex may result in allergic reactions. Reports of such reactions have increased in recent years—especially among health care workers.

What is latex?

Latex products are manufactured from a milky fluid derived from the rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Several types of synthetic rubber are also referred to as "latex," but these do not cause allergic reactions.

What is latex allergy?

Latex allergy is a reaction to certain proteins in latex rubber. The amount of latex exposure needed to produce sensitization or an allergic reaction is unknown. Increasing the exposure to latex proteins increases the risk of developing allergic symptoms. In sensitized persons, symptoms usually begin within minutes of exposure; but they can occur hours later and can be quite varied. Mild reactions to latex involve skin redness, hives, or itching. More severe reactions may involve respiratory symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, and asthma. Rarely, shock may occur; however, a life-threatening reaction is seldom the first sign of latex allergy.

Who is at risk of developing latex allergy?

Health care workers are at risk of developing latex allergy because they use latex gloves frequently. Workers with less glove use (such as housekeepers, hairdressers, and workers in industries that manufacture latex products) are also at risk.

Is skin contact the only type of latex exposure?

No. Latex proteins become fastened to the lubricant powder used in some gloves. When workers change gloves, the protein/powder particles become airborne and can be inhaled.

Learn to recognize the symptoms of latex allergy: skin rash; hives; flushing; itching; nasal, eye, or sinus symptoms; asthma; and (rarely) shock.

How is latex allergy treated?

Detecting symptoms early, reducing exposure to latex, and obtaining medical advice are important to prevent long-term health effects. Once a worker becomes allergic to latex, special precautions are needed to prevent exposures. Certain medications may reduce the allergy symptoms; but complete latex avoidance, though quite difficult, is the most effective approach.

Are there other types of reactions to latex besides latex allergy?

Yes. The most common reaction to latex products is ***irritant contact dermatitis***—the development of dry, itchy, irritated areas on the skin, usually the hands. This reaction is caused by irritation from wearing gloves and by exposure to the powders added to them. ***Chemical sensitivity dermatitis*** results from the chemicals added to latex during harvesting, processing, or manufacturing. These chemicals can cause a skin rash similar to that of poison ivy. Neither irritant contact dermatitis nor chemical sensitivity dermatitis is a true allergy.

How can I protect myself from latex allergy?

Take the following steps to protect yourself from latex exposure and allergy in the workplace:

❶ Use nonlatex gloves for activities that are not likely to involve contact with infectious materials (food preparation, routine housekeeping, general maintenance, etc.).

❷ Appropriate barrier protection is necessary when handling infectious materials. If you choose latex gloves, use powder-free gloves with reduced protein content.

- Such gloves reduce exposures to latex protein and thus reduce the risk of latex allergy.
- So-called hypoallergenic latex gloves do not reduce the risk of latex allergy. However, they may reduce reactions to chemical additives in the latex (chemical sensitivity dermatitis).

❸ Use appropriate work practices to reduce the chance of reactions to latex.

- When wearing latex gloves, do not use oil-based hand creams or lotions (which can cause glove deterioration).
- After removing latex gloves, wash hands with a mild soap and dry thoroughly.
- Practice good housekeeping: frequently clean areas and equipment contaminated with latex-containing dust.

❹ Take advantage of all latex allergy education and training provided by your employer and become familiar with procedures for preventing latex allergy.

❺ Learn to recognize the symptoms of latex allergy: skin rash; hives; flushing; itching; nasal, eye, or sinus symptoms; asthma; and (rarely) shock.

What if I think I have latex allergy?

If you develop symptoms of latex allergy, avoid direct contact with latex gloves and other latex-containing products until you can see a physician experienced in treating latex allergy.

If you have latex allergy, consult your physician regarding the following precautions:

- ✓ Avoid contact with latex gloves and products.
- ✓ Avoid areas where you might inhale the powder from latex gloves worn by other workers.
- ✓ Tell your employer and health care providers (physicians, nurses, dentists, etc.) that you have latex allergy.
- ✓ Wear a medical alert bracelet.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information about latex allergy, or to request a copy of NIOSH Alert No. 97-135, *Preventing Allergic Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace*, call **1-800-35-NIOSH (1-800-356-4674)**

You may also visit the NIOSH Homepage on the World Wide Web at

http://www.cdc.gov/niosh

To access latex allergy websites, select *Latex Allergy* through the NIOSH Homepage, or access the websites directly at the following locations:

http://mediswww.cwru.edu/dept/anesth/lair/lair.htm

http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/lib_latx.htm

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