

Latex Allergies and Reactions – Quick Tips



Every day we use products made of latex. You'll find latex in office supplies, medical supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE) and numerous household objects. Most who encounter latex through general use have no health issues. But for some, exposure to latex gloves (and other products containing natural rubber latex) can cause discomfort or painful reactions.

Reports of latex reactions have increased in recent years, especially among health care workers. It is estimated that 8 to 12 percent of health care workers are latex sensitive. Also at risk are workers with less frequent latex use (hairstylists, food service workers, housekeeping personnel and laundry workers) and workers in industries that manufacture latex products.

What is Latex?

"Latex" refers to natural rubber latex products made from the milky fluid derived from the rubber tree, *Hevea Brasiliensis*. Several chemicals are added to the fluid during the processing and manufacture of commercial latex. Some proteins in latex can cause a range of mild to severe allergic reactions. The chemicals added during processing may also cause reactions.

Latex Allergies, Symptoms and Reactions

Three types of reactions can occur in people using latex products:

- Irritant contact dermatitis
- Allergic contact dermatitis
- Latex allergy

Irritant contact dermatitis is the most common reaction to latex products. It is not a true allergy. Irritant contact dermatitis is characterized by the development of dry, itchy, irritated areas on the skin (usually the hands). This reaction is caused by skin irritation from using gloves and possibly by exposure to other workplace products and chemicals. It can also result from repeated hand washing and drying, incomplete hand drying, use of cleaners and sanitizers and exposure to powders added to the gloves.

Allergic contact dermatitis, sometimes called delayed hypersensitivity or chemical sensitivity dermatitis, results from exposure to the chemicals that are added to the natural rubber latex during harvesting, processing or manufacturing. These chemicals can cause latex reactions similar to those caused by poison ivy. The rash usually begins 24 to 48 hours after contact and may progress to oozing skin blisters or spread away from the original contact area.

Latex allergy (immediate hypersensitivity) is the most serious reaction to latex. Reactions usually begin within minutes of exposure, but they can occur hours later and can produce various symptoms. Mild reactions involve skin redness, hives or itching. More severe reactions may involve respiratory symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, difficult breathing, coughing spells and wheezing. Although rare, shock may occur.

The amount of latex exposure needed to produce an allergic reaction is unknown. The risk of progression from skin rash to more serious reactions is also unknown. However, studies of other allergy-causing substances from organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that the higher the overall exposure, the greater likelihood that a person will become sensitized. These studies have also shown that when powdered latex gloves are worn, more latex protein reaches the skin. Also, when powdered gloves are changed, protein particles may be released into the air, where they can be inhaled.

Preventing Allergic Reactions

Workers with ongoing exposure to latex may be at risk for developing latex allergy. The following precautions are suggested to protect workers from latex exposure and potential reactions:

1. Use non-latex gloves when possible. Alternatives include vinyl or nitrile gloves
2. When using latex gloves, choose powder-free gloves with reduced protein content
3. When wearing latex gloves, do not use oil-based hand creams or lotions as they may cause glove deterioration
4. Frequently clean work areas that may be contaminated with latex-containing dust
5. Frequently change ventilation filters and vacuum bags that are used in latex-contaminated areas
6. Recognize the symptoms of latex reactions
7. Avoid direct contact with latex gloves and products if you develop symptoms of latex allergies, seek medical attention
8. If you have a latex allergy, follow your physician's instructions
9. Actively participate in training and education on latex allergies and reactions

Sources

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
Latex

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Alert Booklet
Preventing Allergic Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
Hospital eTool: Healthcare Wide Hazards – Latex Allergy

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