

LATEX ALLERGIES

Questions and Answers

What is latex?

Latex is a natural product from the milky sap of the rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Due to its durability, flexibility, and low manufacturing costs, latex is a popular material.

A latex allergy is an allergy to products made from

What are latex allergies?

natural rubber latex. It is an allergy to proteins originating from the rubber tree and still present in products made from natural rubber latex.

Allergies develop when the immune system treats these proteins as if they were harmful. Each time you

What causes latex allergies?

are exposed to latex, the immune system builds up antibodies. After repeated exposure to latex, the protein reacts with the antibodies. Powerful chemicals attack the protein, causing allergy-like symptoms.

Exposure to latex can occur through:

- contact with skin or mucous membranes, such as the mouth, eyes, genitals, bladder or rectum
- breathing air with dust particles containing latex proteins

Anyone who comes in contact with latex has a risk of developing latex allergies. Some people who should be concerned are:

Who is at risk?

- *patients whose regular care involves latex* - persons with disabilities such as spina bifida, congenital urological abnormalities, cerebral palsy and Dandy-Walker syndrome are particularly at risk because of their repeated exposure to surgical procedures. At-home procedures associated with these disabilities, such as bladder catheterization with a latex catheter may also put people at risk
- *health care workers*
- *people who work with latex*

There are several types of allergic reactions to latex, differentiated by the severity of the response.

Symptoms

Mild reaction symptoms may include:

- skin rash
- hives
- itchy or watery eyes
- runny nose
- redness where contact with the latex was made
- swelling of the face or hands

A more serious reaction (called an anaphylactic shock) may have symptoms like:

- drop in blood pressure
- rapid heart rate
- swelling of the throat
- wheezing, caused by blocking of airways
- flushing of the face

Latex can be found in several products and locations.

Health Care Settings (hospitals, dental offices,

What products contain latex?

physicians' offices, and health clinics:

The Home:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| • gloves | • tourniquets |
| • catheters | • injection ports in intravenous tubing |
| • blood pressure cuffs | • enema tips |
| • rubber tops in vials | • anesthesia masks |

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| • gloves | • bandages |
| • balloons | • rubber bands |
| • carpet backing | • water toys |
| • condoms and diaphragms | • tub mats |
| • elastic on socks and other clothing | • rubber handgrips on racquets and tools |

Cross-reference allergies

Seven allergenic proteins have been identified in latex and some are structurally similar and "cross reactive" with proteins in certain fruits. Therefore, it has been noted that some individuals with certain food allergies may also be allergic to latex. It is recommended that patients allergic to the following foods be warned of potential for latex allergy before

- bananas
- water chestnuts
- avocados
- celery
- figs
- papayas
- kiwi
- tomatoes
- passion fruit
- peaches

Identifying latex allergies

having surgery:

Identifying a sensitivity to latex comes from a review of past medical history, a physical exam and blood tests. Three FDA-approved blood tests for latex specific IgE antibodies, called IgE immunoassays, are now used:

- Pharmacia & Upjohn CAP System
- Diagnostic Products' Alastat
- Hycor Assay

There is also a recent alternative procedure which involves diagnostic skin testing, and uses the latex reagent. The procedure is currently on the verge of

Living with latex allergies

approval by the FDA.

If you have an allergy to latex, you should take the following precautions:

- carry an adrenaline kit (Ana-Kit or EpiPen) to treat possible severe allergic reactions
- use a medic-alert bracelet
- carry a pair of latex-free gloves in case of an unscheduled hospital visit

Patients should inform their doctors of latex concerns before any surgeries so special precautions may be taken in the operating room (such as scheduling surgery at the beginning of the day, use of non-latex

equipment and medical devices).

With repeated exposure, it is possible for people who initially have mild reactions to develop more severe reactions. However, it is important to note that a severe allergic reaction to latex may occur without

For further information

For more information on latex allergies and latex-free products contact Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Canada or one of the following organizations:

www.latexallergyresources.org

www.latexallergylinks.tripod.com

www.decentexposures.com
(latex free undergarments)

For more information please contact:

**Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Canada, #977-167 Lombard Avenue, Winnipeg MB R3B 0V3
1-800-565-9488 E-mail spinab@mts.net Website: www.sbhac.ca**

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