

## Latex allergy

### *Background*

ALLERGY to latex (natural rubber) is now recognised to be an increasing problem. The rise in the number of people becoming affected is thought to be due to the increase in the use of latex gloves since the recognition of the spread of blood-borne viral diseases such as hepatitis and AIDS. Latex gloves are the conventional means for preventing contact with body fluids.

Both children and adults are affected, and children who have had repeated surgical operations are particularly at risk. It has been suggested that some babies may become sensitised when they come into contact with latex gloves at birth. Infants also come across many articles of clothing, toys and other everyday items that contain rubber, such as dummies. Any of these could also be sensitising them to latex.

Latex is the common name for the fluid produced by many plants but it is the latex that comes from the rubber tree *Hevea Braziliensis* that is potentially dangerous to people who are allergic to it.

Groups who are particularly at risk include health care workers and people who have repeated surgery, because of their increased exposure to latex. The condition is most common in atopic people (people with a tendency to develop allergies).

### *Types of reaction to latex*

There are two types of allergic reaction to latex. These are known as type-1 and type-4 reactions

**Type-4** is a non-life threatening dermatitis on sites of contact, produced by an allergy to the chemicals used when processing the rubber. Symptoms include reddening, itching and swelling of the skin, which develop one or two days after contact.

**Type-1** allergy is potentially life-threatening. Those affected are sensitive to the natural proteins in latex. These people may suffer from nasal irritations, urticaria (hives), asthma and anaphylaxis.

### *Management of latex allergy*

Latex allergy is potentially a serious problem but it can be managed and controlled. If you are sensitive to latex, it is possible you will react to any latex product and you should try to avoid any articles made from rubber. There are numerous everyday items to be avoided, including gloves, balloons, rubber toys, pencil erasers, latex mattresses and pillows, hot water bottles and some contraceptives (condoms and the diaphragm). It must be remembered that people use latex gloves at home to do the washing up.

Some people with relatively mild latex allergy may be able to use some latex products. They may also be able to use some brands and not others as different companies will use varying manufacturing processes that alter the nature of the latex protein. But even if you are slightly sensitive, it is sensible to avoid contact as much as possible as with each contact the degree of your allergy and the reaction may increase. People with severe allergy should not use any latex products.

### *Latex and fruit allergy*

The latex-fruit syndrome associated with latex allergy is an important issue. Some of the proteins present in latex also exist in some fruits and some plants. If a person is allergic to the protein in latex that is also present in bananas, for example, they may have a cross-reaction if they eat a banana. In some cases this works the other way around – if you are allergic to bananas, you may be allergic to the same proteins in latex. The fresh fruits that commonly cause problems are banana, avocado, kiwi and chestnut and occasionally other foods including walnut.

# The Anaphylaxis Campaign

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## ***Be open about your allergy***

Whether you have a type 1 or a type 4 reaction to latex, when you go to a dentist or a doctor, especially if you are to have an operation, it is essential that you give information about your latex allergy. It's not just latex gloves that need to be avoided; latex is also used in catheters, syringes, anaesthetic mouthpieces, elasticated bandages and protective sheets. There are alternatives that can be used and there are also alternatives to everyday latex items. For example, non-latex condoms are available.

There is also a possible risk from cold seal adhesives used in some food packaging. These can contain latex. However the risks are probably low except in the most highly allergic people. This opinion is based on the small number of reports received by the Campaign helpline and by the Latex Allergy Support Group.

## ***Special tips***

- Be bold and confident in warning medical attendants, friends, and others of your latex allergy and its effects.
- If you suspect you have an allergy to latex, go to your GP and ask for a referral to an allergy clinic. There you can be tested and receive further advice.
- If you are prescribed injectable adrenaline (also known as epinephrine) carry it at all times and wear a MedicAlert emblem.

Further information: The Latex Allergy Support Group.  
Address: PO Box 27, Filey YO14 9YH. Helpline (7pm-10pm): 07071 225838. Website: [www.lasg.co.uk](http://www.lasg.co.uk)

*This fact sheet is based on information available at the time of going to press but may be subject to change. Remember too that all of us are different and individual cases require individual medical attention. Please be guided by your GP or consultant.*

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