

Latex Allergy



Latex (natural rubber) has been used to make medical gloves and other commonly used products for over 100 years. Latex allergy was first recognized in the general population in the late 1970's.

Since that time, it has become a major health issue. People who have intense and long term exposure to latex gloves or medical products which contain latex, especially from early in life, are at very high risk. People with spina bifida therefore, are at the highest risk. Many people with spina bifida are sensitive to latex, yet are completely unaware of the risks.

Commonly Used Medical Products That May Contain Latex:

Blood Pressure Cuffs, Stethoscopes, Disposable Gloves, Oral and Nasal Airways, Endotracheal Tubes, Tourniquets, Intravenous Tubing, Syringes, Electrode Pads, Surgical Masks, Protective Eye Wear (Goggles), *Catheters*, Injection ports, Rubber tops of multidose vials, Wound drains

Household Products That May Contain Latex

Rubberbands, Pencil Erasers (Rubbers), Wheelchair Tires or Handle Grips, Bicycle Hand Grips, Carpeting, Shoe soles, Expandable Fabric (Elastic) on Waistbands, Hot Water Bottles, Condoms, Diaphragms (Dutch Cap), Balloons, Baby Dummies and Baby Bottle Teats.

These items should not be seen as a COMPLETE list as there are hundreds of products available that contain latex. Some products are available in latex free forms!

What is Latex?

Latex is a milky fluid that comes from the tropical rubber tree (hevea brasiliensis).

Several chemicals are added to the fluid during processing and manufacturing of commercial latex.

Proteins in natural latex (not synthetic) are an allergen in people with significant long term exposure, but how much exposure is unknown.

Long term or cumulative exposure is seen in people who undergo repeated surgeries or medical procedures from early in life.

In spina bifida, neurosurgery or bladder and bowel programs, diagnostic tests, and medical examinations are the main reasons for the intense and constant exposure which leads to increased sensitivity to latex.

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What is an Allergy?

An allergy is an abnormal, acquired sensitivity to a foreign substance which causes the immune system to mount a misguided reaction to that substance whenever it comes into contact with it.

The immune system is the body's defence against invaders.

Symptoms of Latex Allergy

When the immune system detects latex proteins, a range of reactions can start within minutes or hours.

Symptoms of latex allergy (immediate hypersensitivity) may be mild or severe:

Mild reactions include: skin rashes, hives, flushing, itching, nasal, eye or sinus symptoms. Mild reactions may progress quickly and unpredictably to a severe reaction.

Symptoms of severe reactions include: coughing, wheezing, bronchospasms (asthma), or life threatening anaphylaxis and shock.

Anaphylaxis is characterized by hives, laryngeal edema, shortness of breath, tachycardia (very rapid heart rate) and bronchospasms (asthma).

It is rarely the first sign of latex allergy, but milder reactions often go unnoticed until a life threatening event occurs.

Reactions to certain foods, and especially: potatoes, tomatoes, bananas, avocados, kiwi, papaya, and chestnuts are also associated with latex allergy.

Diagnosing Latex Allergy

Latex allergy should be suspected in anyone who exhibits allergy symptoms after an exposure to natural rubber or implicated foods.

It should ALWAYS be suspected in people with spina bifida. Since continued exposure could result in a serious reaction, anyone who experiences mild symptoms must be evaluated by a physician.

Diagnosis is made on the basis of the outcome of the medical history, which includes food allergies, physical examination, and blood and skin tests.

Treating Latex Allergy

The most effective way to prevent latex allergy is to avoid latex completely.

A primary step in avoidance is awareness. Household and medical items that are made of latex (natural rubber, not synthetic rubber), should be removed from the home and medical environment.

People who are at risk of latex allergy or have had a reaction should inform all medical and other community professionals with whom they interact, so they can remove latex products from the environment.

Physicians and surgeons need to understand the importance of maintaining latex-free areas because latex proteins from latex gloves escape into the air and enter the body membranes through respiration.

Be Prepared

If you have had a mild or severe reaction to any latex product, or have food allergies, it is important to wear a medic-alert bracelet or necklace, carry an epi-pen (portable, injectable epinephrine), carry non-sterile gloves, notify community professionals of your health risk, and avoid any environment where you may come into contact (either directly or indirectly) with products containing latex.

People who have a latex allergy, or are at high risk, which includes people with SB, should be aware of latex containing products that may trigger an allergic reaction. Some of those products are listed below.

Case Study

15-year-old George (not his real name) has Spina Bifida, but not Hydrocephalus, and is walking.

Over the years he has had problems with his bladder and bowels. So far, he has had five operations.

He first had problems, possibly with latex, when he was about six years old.

When he came home from school one day, his face started to swell, his nose disappeared and his eyes were like tiny slits.

I rushed him to our GP who wanted him to take medication daily (I think some sort of anti histamine). The doctor said it was the worst case he had ever seen.

I gave him the medicine but as the weeks went by no other attack followed. As he was already on permanent antibiotics I felt uneasy about so much medication and eventually stopped giving it to him.

From then on, about 2-3 times a year he would have swollen watery eyes, feel unwell and sometimes his face would swell, but never as badly as the first time. We started to think of hay fever, but our GP thought it was not worth having him tested. We started to suspect latex when we bought him a latex mask at the seaside.

He wore it for a short time before we realised his face was red and swollen. When George was about 14, after a dental examination, he came out in red blotches, swelling and blisters around and in his mouth.

The next visit, very soon after, was worse. He then had the same symptoms but also could not breathe properly and had pains in his chest. At this stage I insisted that he was tested. He was diagnosed as latex allergy Type 1 at Hospital. The skin prick test also showed a very small reaction to pollen.

Since then he has had two reactions, once when he had to leave a hospital where he was visiting a patient because his eyes were very sore and watery, and recently he came home with sore, watery eyes and also breathing problems and chest pains.