

Occupational Health Department

Latex information for employees

Latex and you

This fact sheet tells you about the health problems that may occur if you are exposed to natural rubber latex at work. Natural rubber latex is present in many medical and other products, including latex gloves.

What is Latex?

Natural rubber latex is produced by the hevea brasiliensis tree. The cloudy liquid latex is collected by tapping the tree. The liquid then goes through a complex manufacturing process. Rubber is composed of natural proteins and added chemicals. Some of which, will be removed by the washing processes in the later stages of production.

The final product is a durable, flexible material providing a high degree of protection against many micro organisms. For this reason latex is often used in the manufacture of protective gloves.

Where is it found?

Latex is used in the manufacture of gloves in addition to many medical products e.g. airways, intravenous tubing, stethoscopes, catheters, dressings/bandages. It is also found in many household products.

Should I be concerned about latex?

Reported latex asthma and skin complaints have steadily increased in recent years. This could be due to the increased awareness of the problem, use of latex gloves and other products containing latex.



Who is at increased risk of developing sensitivity to latex?

Anyone can develop problems related to latex exposure but certain people are more vulnerable.

These are people:

- With a history of eczema, asthma or hay fever
- Who have had multiple surgical, dental procedures and anaesthesia
- With allergies to some foods e.g. bananas, kiwi fruit, tomatoes etc.

What problems can latex cause?

- Irritation
- Redness, soreness, dryness or skin cracking where skin is in contact with latex. This is not an allergic reaction and symptoms will disappear and not recur when the irritant is identified and removed.

Type I Allergy (immediate hypersensitivity)

This allergic response occurs almost immediately on contact with latex.

- Local or generalised rash
- Nasal inflammation
- Swollen eyes
- Runny nose
- Asthma or difficulty breathing

Rarely, this can cause a very serious reaction called anaphylaxis.

Type IV Allergy - Contact dermatitis

This is a reaction to the manufacturing chemicals and can cause:

- Redness, skin cracking, blisters that are usually localised to the hands and arms.
- Reaction occurring 10-24 hours after exposure and may worsen over the next 72 hours

What should I do?

Most skin conditions are not latex related but must be reported so that symptoms can be investigated and treated properly.

- Ensure you receive training in appropriate glove use and hand care (see Infection Prevention and Control Leaflet “When & How to wash your hands (Easy Read) & the H&S –POL-004-07. “Latex Allergy Policy”)
- A representative in your department will examine your skin periodically and ask you if you are experiencing any problems
- Report any symptoms promptly to your manager and the Occupational Health Department.

What should my employer do?

- The Occupational Health Department will screen you on employment. They will also advise your manager if you are sensitive to latex so that you can be provided with an appropriate alternative glove type.
- Your manager should undertake a risk assessment of your workplace and you should report any skin problems promptly to Occupational Health.
- Your department should provide you with a synthetic alternative glove type if you are sensitised to latex.

General Hand Care Advice

- Always wet hands with water before applying soap and pat dry.
- Always dry skin well
- Do not wear gloves unnecessarily or for long periods of time and wash your hands after removal
- Use the hospital approved hand cream.

Further Information

www.hse.gov.uk/latex

Patient Information

Medical aspects of skin disease Medical Guidance Note MS24 HSE books
1998 reprinted with amendments 2004 ISBN 07176 1545 6

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