

Occupational Health - Fact Sheet

LATEX ALLERGIES

The term “latex” refers to natural rubber latex, the product manufactured from a milky fluid derived from the rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Several types of synthetic rubber are also referred to as “latex,” but these do not release the proteins that cause allergic reactions.

Latex allergy is a reaction to certain proteins in latex rubber. The amount of latex exposure needed to produce an allergic reaction is unknown. Increasing the exposure to latex proteins increases the risk of developing allergic symptoms. In sensitized people, symptoms usually begin within minutes of exposure; but they can occur hours later and can be quite varied. Mild reactions to latex involve skin redness, rash, hives, or itching. More severe reactions may involve symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, and asthma.

The most common reaction to latex products is *irritant contact dermatitis*, the development of dry, itchy, irritated areas of the skin, usually the hands.

Latex proteins can become fastened to the lubricant powder used in some gloves. When workers change gloves, the protein/powder particles become airborne and can be inhaled.

Detecting symptoms early, reducing exposure to latex, and obtaining medical advice are important to prevent long-term health effects. Once a worker becomes allergic to latex, special precautions are needed to prevent exposures. Certain medications may reduce the allergy symptoms; but complete latex avoidance is the most effective approach.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has developed the following recommendations to help prevent latex allergies.

- Employers
 - Provide non-latex gloves for employees.
 - If barrier protection is needed, i.e. handling infectious materials - provide reduced protein, powder free gloves.
 - Provide education programs for workers about latex allergies.
 - Periodically screen high risk employees for symptoms.

- Employees
 - Use non-latex gloves for noninfectious tasks.
 - If needed for barrier protection from infectious materials, use reduced protein, powder- free gloves.
 - Wash hands after latex glove use.
 - Good Housekeeping - Remove latex-containing dust from the workplace.
 - Familiarize with procedures for preventing latex allergies.
 - Recognize symptoms of latex allergy.