

# Latex Allergies

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## Latex Allergies

### What is latex?

Latex is a milky fluid produced by rubber trees. Using different methods latex can be processed into a variety of different products. Products made into a natural rubber latex are very common. Dipped latex products most often trigger allergic reactions; among these products are gloves, balloons and condoms. In rare instances some people may react to rubber bands, erasers, rubber parts of toys, rubber components in medical devices, elastic in clothes, or feeding nipples or pacifiers. Products molded from hard, crepe rubber, such as soles of shoes, are unlikely to cause reactions. Almost all latex paints are not a problem since they do not contain natural rubber latex.

### Incidence

7% – 17% of health care workers have latex sensitivity. For operating room personnel, statistics show a 15% – 20% occurrence. Health care workers with allergies to house dust or animal danders have about a 24% incidence of latex allergies. Then general population of atopic (allergic) individuals have about a 7% risk of latex allergy

Children with certain medical conditions have become a large portion of the affected population. Children with spina bifida have show up to a 71% sensitivity to latex this is thought to be from repeated exposure to latex proteins through surgery and direct latex contact with the central nervous system and mucous membranes, which increases the potential for the development of latex allergy.

Many non-health care workers are being exposed to latex gloves, such as police officers, firefighters, hairdressers, and food handlers, especially those in restaurants, grocery stores and school cafeterias.

### Types of Reactions

Irritant contact dermatitis, a non-immune response, is the most common response to latex exposure and is associated with glove use. This is a direct injury to the skin and

symptoms include dry, red skin, cracks, fissures, scaling and itchiness. These symptoms usually develop shortly after exposure and resolve several hours after the source of irritation is removed.

Chemical sensitivity dermatitis is a delayed hypersensitivity, which occurs when a person is allergic to the chemicals added to latex during harvesting, processing, or manufacturing. A rash appears 24-48 hours after exposure and may look like poison ivy, with oozing blisters over the exposed area.

“True” latex allergy is an immediate hypersensitivity to latex. This is a Type 1 reaction and is an immediate immunological reaction caused by latex proteins. A number of exposures may be needed before an allergy occurs.

## **Symptoms of Latex Hypersensitivity**

A reaction usually begins within minutes of exposure and may be mild at first. Although in some cases, it may progress to anaphylaxis. Symptoms depend upon exposure. Hives or Urticaria (itching) may develop following direct skin contact with latex. A runny nose, wheezing, congestion, conjunctivitis and difficulty breathing related to airway edema may develop if the respiratory system is exposed to latex particles that are bound to glove powder and become aerosolized when gloves are “snapped” on and off.

## **Diagnosis**

Consult your health care provider or an allergist to determine if you have a latex allergy. Your health care provider will perform a complete history related to latex exposure and symptoms. Many people notice a problem while blowing up a balloon or having dental work, often complaining of lip numbness or swelling. There is no FDA-licensed skin test material in the USA available for skin testing. Some clinicians use in-house extracts which should be used cautiously since skin testing to latex is unpredictable and may lead to anaphylaxis.

The safest test for a patient with a Type 1 latex allergy is a blood test which test for IgE antibodies. A positive IgE test indicates a positive latex allergy. These tests are only 70% -80% effective, so there may be some false negatives. A negative IgE does not mean that a latex allergy does not exist. Your health care provider may diagnose your allergy based on symptoms and history.

## **Treatment**

The only treatment for latex allergy is avoidance. It will be necessary to substitute latex free products for daily personal or occupational use. The single most effective intervention is to eliminate the use of latex gloves in the workplace, particularly powdered latex gloves. The latex proteins bind to the powder and can be carried through the air to be inhaled by all in the room.

## Prevention Tips

- Wear a Medic-Alert bracelet or necklace indicating a latex allergy
- Carry an epi-pen (auto-injectible, self-administered epinephrine)
- Carry a pair of non-latex (vinyl or nitrile) gloves with you when you go to your dentist or health care provider.
- If you are scheduled for a procedure, ask the facility to schedule it as the first case of the day, when the amount of airborne latex is minimal. Preferably on a Monday morning.
- Be aware of cross-reactivity to food which may exacerbate the reaction, i.e. banana, mango, papaya, kiwi, avocado, pear, passion fruit, grape, apricot, pineapple, chestnuts, and other tropical fruit.
- After removing latex gloves, wash and dry hands thoroughly, as latex proteins bound to powder may remain on your hands for several hours.
- Do not use lotion or oil-based products with latex gloves
- Look for latex-free products
- Use silicone baby nipples/pacifiers
- Choose underwear with Lycra instead of latex elastic.
- Avoid the use of latex balloons, use silver Mylar balloons instead.
- Call ahead to restaurants to ensure they do not use latex gloves while preparing food.

## Support

There are several websites that have information regarding latex-free products as well as support groups and information for latex allergy individuals. A few are listed below (external links open in a new window):

- <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/97-135/>
- <http://www.latexallergyresources.org>
- <http://www.aaaai.org>
- <http://www.familydoctor.org>
- <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/latexallergy>

### 5 Star!

Dr Richard Mayse  
& all the staff are  
exceptional!

— *Janice Raver*

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