Occupational Allergens

Latex Allergy

A Patient’s Guide
Latex allergy is a reaction to certain proteins found in latex, which is processed from a liquid in the bark of tropical rubber trees. Latex is used in more than 40,000 products in the workplace and at home. Latex is a part of everyday life — in dishwashing gloves, swimming goggles, balloons and baby bottle nipples. Latex is also found in medical and industrial settings — blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes and syringes — potentially affecting millions of healthcare and food service workers, police and firefighters. This guide is designed to help you recognize symptoms of allergic reactions to latex and minimize risks of exposure and severe reactions.

An allergy is your body’s way of saying “I don’t like it” to a substance to which you are hypersensitive. Such substances, which are normally harmless, are called allergens. Allergens cause your body’s immune system to produce antibodies called IgE to protect you. The IgE antibodies, in turn, cause the release of inflammatory chemicals such as histamines, resulting in allergy symptoms from mild to life-threatening.

Blood testing tells your doctor which IgE antibody or antibodies your body is producing and therefore which allergens are likely to cause a reaction. A small sample of your blood is mixed with different allergens to look for chemical reactions. The reaction is recorded and analyzed by a computer and reported to your doctor. Blood testing can determine how much of a specific IgE your body is producing. This helps the doctor gauge the severity of your allergy.

Blood testing has some other advantages, too. It is more convenient. Since one blood sample can be used to test for many allergens, it may require fewer visits to your doctor’s office. For children, it means one needle stick for a blood test rather than multiple sticks for skin tests. Also, blood testing does not require introducing suspected allergens to the skin, as skin testing does. This avoids any potential interactions with medications you may be taking.

The IgE antibodies responsible for allergic reactions are specific to each allergen — for example, the IgE antibody to latex is different from IgE antibodies to other allergens such as dust mites, pollen or a specific food.
Symptoms of latex allergy include:
- Skin redness and itching at point of contact
- Rash or hives
- Scratchy throat, runny nose
- Wheezing or asthma
- Chest tightness
- Collapse or shock

The most serious reaction, called anaphylaxis or anaphylactic shock, can develop immediately after latex exposure in highly sensitive people and causes airways to constrict, making it difficult to breathe. Blood pressure may drop, causing dizziness or loss of consciousness. Other symptoms include confusion, slurred speech, blue skin, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

A latex-sensitive person can have a severe allergic reaction with no previous warning or symptoms. In general, however, latex allergy increases with latex exposure, especially in people with the following risk factors:
- Multiple operations, especially in childhood
- Spina bifida
- Urological abnormalities
- Work in healthcare or rubber industries
- Frequent use of latex gloves or other latex-containing products
- Other allergies
- At least one parent with diagnosed allergies
- Allergy to food that has proteins common to those in latex: bananas, avocados, chestnuts, kiwis and tomatoes

Latex sensitivity and allergy is a growing concern.
Over the past 20 years, latex exposure has increased due in part to the increasing use of gloves, as mandated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), to protect against emerging infectious disease pathogens such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). This affects not only healthcare and emergency service personnel, but also laboratory technicians, housekeeping personnel, public works personnel and food handlers, among others.

Not all latex-related reactions are the result of latex allergy:
- Irritant contact dermatitis shows up as dry, itchy and irritated skin that develops over time. It can be caused by some powders added to latex gloves but is more likely to be caused by detergents left on your hands or sweating or rubbing under the gloves.
- Chemical sensitivity dermatitis presents itself as poison ivy-like blisters that appear 24 to 48 hours after contact. They are caused by chemicals used to process latex and not by the latex itself.
Prevention is the best medicine. Currently there is no cure for latex allergy. If you are at risk of developing latex sensitivity, your best defense is to reduce your exposure. Take steps to learn which of the products you currently use contain latex and find alternatives. An increasing number of comparable non-latex items are being manufactured.

If you must use latex gloves, choose those that are powder-free and made with low-protein latex. Wash your hands before and after wearing the gloves and be sure to dry your hands thoroughly. Never apply oil-based creams, lotions or soaps before putting on your gloves.

If you’ve been diagnosed with latex allergy, notify your medical and dental care providers, because many of the tools and products they use contain latex. Wear a Med-Alert bracelet or necklace and be sure the people close to you, whether family or coworkers, know about your allergy. Ask your doctor about getting a prescription for an epinephrine self-injection pen, which can save your life in case of anaphylactic shock.

Talk to your doctor if you think you may be allergic to latex. Your doctor can perform a number of simple, painless and quick tests to determine your current level of sensitivity to latex proteins and your risk of developing an allergy in the future. Your doctor can also provide an effective treatment plan for your symptoms and helpful hints to make living with your latex allergy easier.