Natural Rubber Latex Allergy
Introduction

Natural rubber latex comes from the sap of a tropical tree (Hevea brasiliensis) which is grown mainly in Thailand and Malaysia. When the sap has been taken (tapped) from the tree it is sent to processing stations where chemicals are added to stabilise and preserve it. The mixture is then sent to the manufacturers to be made into lots of different products.

There are synthetic (man made rubbers) available that are not made from natural rubber latex and may be a safe alternative for people with latex allergy.

What is latex allergy?

There are two types of latex allergy:

Type I – also known as immediate hypersensitivity.

This is an allergic reaction to proteins present in natural rubber latex. It occurs soon after contact with the latex and can be life threatening. Symptoms can include:

- Itchy eyes, hay fever type symptoms, urticaria (nettle rash), swelling of lips and tongue, breathlessness, wheezing, low blood pressure, anaphylaxis and rarely, death.

Not everyone who has the allergy gets all the symptoms but they may find they worsen over repeated exposure. The symptoms can involve the whole body, not just the area of contact. Sometimes a person may have had no problems with natural rubber latex for months or years before developing the allergy.

Type IV – also known as delayed hypersensitivity.
This is a reaction to chemicals added to natural rubber latex and may appear 6-48 hours after contact. The most common group of chemicals that cause this allergy are known as ‘accelerators.’ Skin appears dry and blistered and the reaction stays within the area of contact.

Some gloves that are latex free can contain the same chemicals as those added to latex gloves. If you are diagnosed type IV you may need to try different brands of gloves to find one that does not affect you. If your employer has an Occupational Health service they should be able to help. There are accelerator free gloves available, so if you work in an area that requires gloves you may need to get your employer to provide you with safer alternatives.

There are no type II or III allergies to latex – the numbering system is based on the different ways the immune system reacts to a wide range of substances.

**How is latex allergy diagnosed?**

- History of reactions and possible trigger factors will be discussed with the Doctor
- Skin prick test (please see skin prick test leaflet for further details)
- A blood test (RAST test) which examines the number of latex antibodies in a small blood sample. An antibody is a protein made by the body to detect ‘foreign objects’ such as bacteria and viruses. In allergy, antibodies are produced to things that are not actually harmful, for example latex or nuts.
- A Latex challenge may be considered if the Doctor feels this may aid diagnosis.
How can it be treated?

At present natural rubber latex allergy cannot be cured. The best way to prevent a reaction is to avoid contact with items containing natural rubber latex.

You may be advised by your Doctor to carry antihistamines in case of a reaction. You may also be prescribed an Epipen if your Immunology Doctor feels it may be required.

You may wish to wear a SOS medical emblem; for example a Medic Alert emblem, which instantly informs others of what treatment you may require.

What other risks are there?

You will need to inform any other health care worker that you have a latex allergy so they use gloves and equipment suitable for you. Other people such as car mechanics, hairdressers, food servers, dentists etc may also wear latex gloves and you will need to ensure they do not put you at risk.

Latex balloons and some latex gloves have powder inside them. The powder absorbs proteins from the latex. If a balloon is popped or the glove taken off the powder remains in the air for a while and some people with latex allergy will react when they breathe in the powder. Hospitals are being encouraged not to use powdered latex gloves for this reason.

Some natural rubber latex items are made by dipping a mould (called a former) into a vat of latex solution. These items (gloves, condoms, elastic bands etc) are a more frequent cause of reactions that items made from dry rubber (such as car tyres, tubing) due to the amount of proteins that remain. However, severely sensitised individuals will react to the dry rubber and it is best to avoid all sources.
There are lots of things that contain natural rubber latex and at the present time it is not always labelled. There are many lists available that contain products to avoid, or you can contact product manufacturers directly for advice.

Items that commonly contain natural rubber latex include: Art and craft supplies, adhesive tape and bandages, balloons, bath mats and plugs, car mats, carpet underlay, condoms, disposable nappies, dummies and teats, elastic in clothing, erasers, some glues, hot water bottles, lottery scratch cards, rubber bands, rubber gloves (both medical and household ones), medication vials (used for injections), shoe soles, sports equipment, toothbrush and pen grips, washers.

This list is not complete as new uses are found for natural rubber latex.

**Fruit and vegetables**

Some people who have a type I allergy to natural rubber latex also have allergies to some fruit and vegetables. This is known as a cross reaction. It occurs because proteins in the food are similar to the proteins in natural rubber latex but the body does not recognise the difference. Common food allergies include tomato, banana, potato, kiwi, avocado, and chestnuts. If you feel you may have reacted to any foods please discuss with your doctor.
References and further information


NHS Constitution. Information on your rights and responsibilities. Available at www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/constitution
If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.

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