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.

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Protect Yourself & Others:

AVOID THE USE OF LATEX GLOVES

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Five Important Facts to Know

What is latex allergy?

Latex allergy is a reaction to certain proteins in latex rubber. The amount of latex exposure needed to produce sensitization or an allergy reaction is unknown. Increasing the exposure to latex proteins increases the risk of developing allergy symptoms. In sensitized persons, symptoms usually begin within minutes of exposure but 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 respiratory symptoms such as difficulty in breathing, coughing, sneezing, and wheezing. Rarely, shock may occur; however, a life-threatening reaction is seldom the first sign of latex allergy.

Health care workers are at risk of developing latex allergy because they use latex gloves frequently. Workers with less glove use (such as housekeepers, hairdressers, and workers in industries that manufacture latex products) are also at risk.

Is skin contact the only type of latex exposure?

No. Latex proteins become fastened to the lubricant powder used in some gloves. When workers change gloves, the protein/powder particles become airborne and can be inhaled.

How is latex allergy treated?

 Detecting symptoms early, reducing exposure to latex, and obtaining medical advice is 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 through quite difficult; in the most effective approach.

Are there other types of reactions to latex besides latex allergy?

Yes. The most common reaction to latex products is irritant contact dermatitis—the development of dry, itchy, irritated areas on the skin, usually the hands. This reaction is caused by irritation from wearing gloves and by exposure to the powders added to them. Irritant contact dermatitis is not a true allergy. Allergic contact dermatitis (sometimes called chemical sensitivity dermatitis) results from the chemicals added to latex during harvesting, processing, or manufacturing. These chemicals can cause a skin rash similar to that of poison ivy.

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What if I think I have latex allergy?

If you develop symptoms of latex allergy, avoid direct contact with latex gloves and other latex-containing products until you can see a physician experienced in treating latex allergy.

If you have latex allergy, consult your physician regarding the following precautions:

• Avoid contact with latex gloves and products.
• Avoid areas where you might inhale the powder from latex gloves worn by other workers.
• Tell your employer and health care providers (physicians, nurses, dentists, etc.) that you have latex allergy.
• Wear a medical alert bracelet.

How can I protect myself from latex allergy?

Take the following steps to protect yourself from latex-exposure and allergy in the workplace:

• Use nonlatex gloves for activities that are not likely to involve contact with infectious materials (food preparation, routine housekeeping, general maintenance, etc.).
• Appropriate barrier protection is necessary when handling infectious materials. If you choose latex gloves, use powder-free gloves with reduced protein content.
• Such gloves reduce exposures to latex protein and thus reduce the risk of latex allergy.
• So-called hypoallergenic latex gloves do not reduce the risk of latex allergy. However, they may reduce reactions to chemical additives in the latex (allergic contact dermatitis).
• Use appropriate work practices to reduce the chance of reactions to latex.
• When wearing latex gloves, do not use oil-based hand creams or lotions which can cause glove deterioration.
• After removing latex gloves, wash hands with mild soap and dry thoroughly.
• Practice good housekeeping: frequently clean areas and equipment contaminated with latex-containing dust.
• Take advantage of all latex allergy education and training provided by your employer and become familiar with procedures for preventing latex allergy.
• Learn to recognize the symptoms of latex allergy: skin rash, hives, flushing, itching, nasal, eye, or sinus symptoms; asthma; and (rarely) shock.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

cdc.gov/niosh

Northwestern University RESEARCH SAFETY

Depending on your needs, simply replace latex gloves with these alternatives:

• Nitrile
• Neoprene
• Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC)

If you have questions or need assistance in finding an alternative to latex, simply contact the Office for Research Safety