

Latex allergies

Allergic reactions occur when an allergen, or a specific substance to which a person is sensitive, makes contact with the skin, or is inhaled into the lungs, swallowed, or injected. Some allergic reactions are mild, while others can be severe and life-threatening.

Natural rubber latex is derived from a milky substance found in rubber trees, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Latex can be found in many household products, over 40,000 consumer products such as balloons, balls, appliance cords, hoses, hot water bottles, pacifiers, swimwear, toys, tires, rubber bands and shoes and in many medical and dental supplies including gloves. Latex allergy generally develops after repeated exposure to products containing natural rubber latex. Some individuals develop hypersensitivity to proteins derived from natural rubber latex, which can cause allergic reactions.

Individuals who may have a higher risk for latex allergies include people who have food allergies. These foods allergies include: apple, almonds, avocado, banana, carrot, celery, chestnut, hazelnut, kiwi, melons, papaya, pear, raw potato, stone fruits (such as peach, plum and cherry) and tomato. Children with spina bifida are at higher risk. About half of all children with spina bifida are allergic to latex. Health care workers because of constant exposure to latex products are also at higher risk and people with a family history of allergies also have an increased risk of latex allergy.

There are three types of allergic reactions to latex. The first is non-allergic irritant contact dermatitis. The least threatening type of latex reaction it results in dryness, itching, burning, scaling, and lesions of the skin. The second reaction is allergic contact dermatitis (type IV hypersensitivity). This is a delayed reaction to additives used in latex processing. This results in the same type of reactions as irritant contact dermatitis with a more severe reaction which spreads to more parts of the body and lasts longer. The third type is an immediate allergic reaction (latex hypersensitivity). This is the most serious allergic reaction to latex and symptoms may include runny nose with hay fever-like symptoms, hives, and severe itching. Rarely, symptoms may progress to a life-threatening condition known as anaphylaxis in which symptoms include generalized flushing of the skin; hives; mouth and throat swelling; difficulty in swallowing or speaking; changes in heart rate; abdominal pain; nausea and vomiting; anxiety; a sudden feeling of weakness (due to a drop in blood pressure); and unconsciousness. This condition could potentially lead to death if not treated immediately.

If you are allergic to latex, you must inform the dentist and verify that they have latex-free products available for use during a dental procedure or surgery. Make sure that the dentist records the latex allergy in your dental record. You should also be sure that not only the dentist but that the staff is also made aware of your latex allergy and that you verify that they are using latex free gloves. If you have had a severe allergic reaction in the past, you should consider carrying an epinephrine kit (EpiPen®) and use a medic alert bracelet that clearly states your allergy. Should you have allergic reaction following a dental procedure, consult your dentist and physician immediately.

Allergies to latex should not prevent you from visiting the dentist as there are ways to avoid experiencing an allergic reaction. It is still important to visit the dentist twice a year for a complete dental examination and cleaning.

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