LATEX ALLERGY

• Latex is the sap from the rubber tree. If you have a latex allergy, your body mistakes latex for a harmful substance.

• Allergy to latex usually affects healthcare workers and others (e.g., hairdressers) who have repeated exposure to latex-containing products (e.g., gloves and catheters).

• Latex allergy is more likely to develop in people who have other allergies.

HOW DOES LATEX ALLERGY DEVELOP?

Latex proteins are foreign to the body. Repeated exposure to minute quantities of latex proteins results in the production of harmful IgE antibodies. The next time you’re exposed to latex, the antibodies signal your immune system to release histamine and other chemicals into your bloodstream (see what is an allergy).

Latex allergy can occur by direct contact (touching) of latex or by breathing in latex particles. Powdered gloves in a hospital environment may cause inhalation of latex proteins. Powdered latex gloves are no longer used in government hospitals in South Africa.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF LATEX ALLERGY?

Mild immediate reactions
• Itching
• Skin redness
• Hives / urticaria

More severe immediate reactions
• Itchy eyes,
• Itchy or runny nose,
• Sneezing,
• Wheezing, coughing, asthma,
• Swelling of the throat,
• Anaphylaxis

Delayed contact reactions
• Red, itchy or crusted lesions on exposed areas
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HOW IS THE DIAGNOSIS MADE?

- A history of symptoms occurring within about an hour of exposure to gloves or other rubber products suggests latex allergy.
- For immediate reactions a blood test and/or skin prick tests can be done to show the presence of the IgE antibodies (see allergy tests). If these tests are negative an immediate type allergy is almost always ruled out.
- Skin prick tests are done by placing a few drops of specially manufactured latex extract on the skin and making a prick through the droplet. Skin prick tests for latex should always be conducted in a hospital with resuscitation facilities.
- It may be necessary to perform patch tests where contact dermatitis is suspected (see contact dermatitis brochure).

HOW IS LATEX ALLERGY TREATED?

If you have a latex allergy, it is essential to avoid further exposure to latex to prevent progression of symptoms.

- Wear a Medic Alert Bracelet.
- Carry injectable adrenaline and antihistamines (see anaphylaxis).
- Avoid exposure to latex.
- Inform your doctor and dentist.
- Explain your allergy to your family members and close friends.
- Call your local emergency, ambulance and hospital to be sure they have their latex-free protocols in place.
- Inform your hairdresser if you are having your hair tinted or highlighted.
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HOW CAN LATEX BE AVOIDED IN THE HOSPITAL ENVIRONMENT?

• Identify and avoid high-risk areas that can result in latex sensitisation.
• Latex sensitive individuals should never wear latex gloves.
• Latex allergic individuals should work in a powder-free environment.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU NEED AN OPERATION OR MEDICAL PROCEDURE?

• Inform your doctor, dentist or anaesthetist.
• It is important that you are the first patient on the theatre list for the day to avoid any latex that may inadvertently be brought into theatre.

WHAT ABOUT LATEX EXPOSURE OUTSIDE THE HOSPITAL ENVIRONMENT?

• Latex is widely found in modern homes. (e.g. dish-washing gloves, baby bottle nipples, balloons, bicycle tyres, rubber bands, rubber toys, hot water bottles, erasers).
• Latex is also found in sports/leisure equipment (e.g. racket grip, squash balls, golfing gloves, wetsuits).
• Latex may be found in condoms, diaphragms and dental dams.

LATEX ALLERGY AND FOOD ALLERGY

• Latex allergy also is related to certain foods, such as avocados, bananas, chestnuts, kiwis and passion fruits. These foods contain some of the same allergens found in latex. If you’re allergic to latex, you have a greater chance of also being allergic to these foods.

A medical specialist with a special interest and skill in allergy might be able to help. See the list of health professionals with skills in allergy on the AFSA website.

AFSA
allergy foundation south africa
http://www.allergyfoundation.co.za