

# Latex Allergy

## What is latex allergy?

Latex is a natural rubber harvested from trees and used in many consumer products. Allergy to natural rubber latex is now being recognized as an increasingly serious medical problem that affects not only health care workers, but the general population as well. The incidence of latex allergy, which now approaches 25 percent for health care workers (physicians, nurses, dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants) and two percent of other people, increased dramatically since the 1980s, due in large part to the increased use of latex gloves by health care workers in order to protect patients and themselves from HIV infection and other diseases. Latex also is present in many household items, including baby bottle nipples, balloons, some bandages, condoms, diaphragms, elastics in garments and socks, erasers, hoses, makeup, rubber bands, stretch textiles, and many toys. Latex allergy can be a significant problem because:

Almost everybody is exposed to latex.

Some people are allergic to latex and don't know it

The more an unsuspecting allergic person is exposed to latex the more serious the reaction can become.

People who already have allergies (hay fever, reactions to animal dander, eczema, etc.) are more susceptible to additional allergies.

## What are the symptoms of latex allergy?

Latex allergies can cause nausea, low blood pressure, and respiratory arrest. Symptoms begin within minutes after contact with the protein allergens in latex. The more common latex allergy is less serious. The symptoms include dry skin, hives tingling sensations, or itching and symptoms usually appear 48-72 hours after the initial exposure. The most serious manifestation of latex allergy, anaphylactic shock, is the same reaction that people who are allergic to bee stings and penicillin get when stung or injected with the antibiotic.

## Who faces special risks to latex allergy?

People who are continually exposed to latex, have spina bifida, or have had multiple surgeries are at a higher risk of developing an allergy to latex

## Is contact with gloves the only problem?

Serious reactions are also due to continuous inhalation of the powder which lines latex gloves and become airborne when the gloves are "snapped off" during removal. The

powder contains latex protein (the allergen) and can remain suspended in the air for up to 12 hours. Continuous exposure to such an environment can cause an asthma-like reaction where the individual has difficulty in breathing, coughing spells, itchy throat, chest pains, tiredness, sneezing, tearing, runny nose, etc. These symptoms, common to many other diseases, often are misdiagnosed.

## What should I do if I am allergic to latex?

If you suspect that you are allergic to latex, inform your dentist before treatment. Gloves made from other materials are available for your dentist to use. If you are not aware that you have the allergy (which many people are not) and you suffer symptoms following a dental procedure or from contact with any latex products, seek treatment immediately, and inform your dentist.