

# Latex

## What is latex?

Natural Rubber Latex (latex) is a milky fluid found in many plants, including the rubber tree.



Latex is used to make many rubber products, such as car tires, rubber gloves, and balloons. The commercially grown *Hevea Brasiliensis* tree, which grows in

Africa and Southeast Asia, is the main source of latex. Latex contains many allergy causing proteins (allergens).

## How the latex is processed is important

Most latex (about 90%) is processed at very high temperatures, into dry sheets or crumbled particles, which are then used to make hard, molded rubber products. The high heat and lengthy process breaks down the allergens. Moulded rubber products do not usually cause allergies, although they can cause reactions in very latex allergic individuals. Examples of these products include shoe soles, car tires and rubber balls.



The remainder of latex (about 10%) is treated with chemicals to prevent bacterial growth, and then used to make soft, dipped rubber products on porcelain moulds. These products contain more allergens and are the main cause of latex allergies. Examples of these products are:

- Single use latex gloves – Latex gloves are the main cause of latex allergies. Some latex gloves contain powder to make them easier to put on. This powder can become airborne causing respiratory symptoms and asthma.
- Condoms, catheters, toy balloons, dental dams.



## Signs and Symptoms of Latex Allergy

There are different types of reactions to latex, ranging in severity from skin rashes to anaphylaxis.

**Irritant Dermatitis** – This is not a true allergy, but can happen if you who wear latex or other protective gloves. The combination of frequent hand washing, strong soaps, hand moisturizers, and body perspiration, can cause symptoms of dry, itchy, red hands. Although not an allergy this may happen before you develop a latex allergy. It is important for you to see a health care professional about these symptoms.

**Allergic Contact Dermatitis** – A sore, red, itchy rash, possibly with small bumps that ooze fluid, which starts within one to four days after exposure. Ongoing, regular exposure to latex can cause thick, scaly skin.

**Asthma and Allergic Rhinitis** – Respiratory symptoms, including nasal congestion, runny nose, sneezing and itchy, watery eyes. Exposure to airborne latex, found in powdered latex gloves and in rubber balloons, can cause asthma.

**Anaphylaxis** – Although rare, some individuals can have life threatening reactions to latex exposure, including swelling of the airway, breathing difficulties, problems with blood pressure, and even death. This is an emergency and requires emergency treatment.

Latex allergies can be complicated and difficult to diagnose. If you suspect you have a latex allergy you should talk to your primary health care provider, who may refer you to an allergy specialist.

## Who is at highest risk?

People with frequent exposure to latex products at work, particularly where single use gloves are used, are at highest risk for latex allergy. Occupations in which single use gloves are commonly used include health care workers, hairdressers, restaurant workers, domestic workers, security personnel, construction workers, greenhouse workers/gardeners, painters, funeral home workers, police, paramedics and firefighters.

If you have had many surgical or medical procedures, particularly from a young age, you are also at risk to develop latex allergy. You are also more likely to develop latex allergy if you have other sensitivities and allergies including atopic eczema.

## Food and Latex

If you are allergic to latex, it is also very common for you to have allergies to certain foods. Foods which are highly associated with latex allergy include banana, kiwi and avocado

Other foods which are sometimes associated with latex allergy include, but aren't limited to apple, carrot, mango, oranges, chestnuts, peanuts, celery, melon, papaya, tomato and potato.

Being aware of the association between latex and foods can help you identify potential risks.

## What should you do if you believe you have a latex allergy?

If you believe you have a latex allergy you should speak to your primary health care provider, who may refer to you to a specialist.

There is no known cure for latex allergy. Some medications can help with symptoms. People with latex allergy need to avoid exposure to latex.

## What should your employer do?

Employers are legally responsible for providing a safe and healthy work environment for all their employees. The employer can:

- ✓ Work with the Joint Health and Safety committee to assess the risk of latex exposure, and identify solutions to create a safer environment.
- ✓ Eliminate latex products in the workplace, as much as possible.
- ✓ Substitute latex gloves with latex-free gloves. (If latex gloves are the only option, provide powder free gloves).
- ✓ Develop policies and procedures to eliminate or minimize the use of latex products.
- ✓ Provide education to workers on latex allergies, and safe work procedures to reduce the risk.

## What should you do if you have a latex allergy?

- ✓ Inform your employer if you have been diagnosed with a latex allergy.
- ✓ Work with your employer, health and safety committee, and union or employee representative, to develop a plan for decreasing potential exposure to latex.
- ✓ Avoid latex products, both in and out of the workplace.
- ✓ Wear an allergy alert bracelet.
- ✓ Carry an epi-pen, if recommended by your physician, and ensure that a co-worker knows how to help in case of severe anaphylactic reaction.

For more information please contact

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