

## General Guidelines for Reducing Employee Exposure to Latex

Latex products are manufactured from a milky fluid derived from the rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Several chemicals are added to this fluid during the processing and manufacture of commercial latex. Some proteins in the latex can cause a range of mild to severe allergic reactions.

A wide variety of products contain latex: medical supplies, personal protective equipment and numerous household objects. Most people who encounter latex products only through their general use in society have no health problems from the use of these products. Employees of the health care industry (doctors, nurses, dentists, technicians) are at risk of developing latex allergy because they use latex gloves frequently. Also at risk are workers with less frequent glove use (hairdressers, housekeepers, food service workers) and workers in industries that manufacture latex products.

In accordance with the recommendations set forth by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Alert entitled “Preventing Allergic Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace”, a general set of guidelines have been developed to reduce employee exposure to latex.

1. Choose powder-free latex gloves when a latex glove is required for barrier protection. The powder present in latex gloves increases the dissemination of allergy-causing proteins and sensitization to latex.
2. Use non-latex gloves when there is little potential for contact with infectious materials or hazardous chemicals, i.e. food service and some housekeeping and maintenance activities.
3. After removing latex gloves, wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly. When wearing latex gloves, do not use oil-based hand creams or lotions unless they have been documented to reduce latex-related problems.
4. Ensure good housekeeping practices to remove latex containing dust from the workplace. Frequently clean contaminated areas and change the ventilation filters and vacuum bags.
5. Learn to recognize the symptoms of latex allergy: skin rashes; hives; flushing; itching; nasal, eye, or sinus symptoms; asthma; and shock.
6. Individuals who develop symptoms of latex allergy, should avoid direct contact with latex containing products until seen by a medical professional experienced in diagnosing latex allergy. **Contact the your University Healthcare Provider (University Health Services or Occupational and Environmental Medicine Program) for medical attention.**

7. If you have a 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 the latex gloves worn by others.
- Tell your employer, physicians, nurses, and dentists that you have a latex allergy.
- Wear a medical alert bracelet.

### **Types of reactions to latex containing products:**

#### ◆ **Irritant Contact Dermatitis:**

Irritant contact dermatitis is the development of dry, itchy, irritated skin (usually hands) and is the most common reaction to latex products. The reaction may be caused by gloves or repeated hand washing, by using cleaners or sanitizers, and by exposure to glove powders. Irritant contact dermatitis is not a true allergy.

#### ◆ **Chemical Sensitivity Dermatitis:**

Chemical sensitivity dermatitis is an allergic contact dermatitis (delayed hypersensitivity) which results from exposure to the chemicals added to latex during harvesting, processing, or manufacturing. A rash usually begins 24 - 48 hours after contact and may progress to oozing blisters or spread away from area of skin touched by latex (like poison ivy).

**Routes of Exposure:** Skin contact

**Diagnosing Allergic Contact Dermatitis:** Patch test

**Treatment:** Switch gloves and good hand care (rinsing well after washing, ointment, creams)

#### ◆ **Latex Allergy:**

Latex allergy (immediate hypersensitivity) reactions usually occur within minutes of exposure, but can occur hours after contact. The symptoms may range from mild (skin redness, hives, or itching) to severe (runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, asthma) to most severe (shock - rare).

**Routes of Exposure:**

**Inhalation:** Breathing proteins associated with glove powder.

**Mucous Membranes Contact:** Contact with proteins associated with glove powder.

**Diagnosing Latex Allergy:**

Blood test to detect latex antibodies.

Skin tests that involve scratching or pricking skin through a drop of liquid containing latex proteins. Positive reaction is redness, itching, swelling at test site.

**Treatment:** The most effective measure to prevent latex allergy is to prevent latex exposures during work as well as during medical or dental care.

National Institutes for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Alert. "Preventing Allergic reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace". June 1997. DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 97-135.