

Allergy to Latex Rubber

Overview

Natural rubber latex is a common ingredient found in many consumer products. These include balloons, balls, appliance cords, hoses, hot water bottles, pacifiers, swimwear, toys, tires, condoms, rubber bands and shoes. Latex also can be found in many medical or dental supplies and devices, such as masks, gloves, syringes, catheters, dressings, tape and bandages.

Unlike some consumer goods made from synthetic (manmade) latex, such as house paint, natural rubber latex is obtained from a milky substance found in rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*).

While many people come in safe contact with latex-containing products every day, others become allergic to natural rubber latex.

Causes and Symptoms

Latex allergy generally develops after repeated exposure to products containing natural rubber latex. When latex-containing medical devices or supplies come in contact with mucous membranes, the membranes may absorb latex proteins. The immune system of some at-risk individuals produces antibodies that react with these proteins.

This is a concern particularly for health care workers who are constantly exposed to surgical gloves and other latex-based health care products. The powder used in latex gloves can absorb the gloves' latex proteins and cause increased exposure to latex. In addition, as the gloves are removed, the powder may become airborne, coming in contact with the eyes, nose or mouth.

When exposed to latex proteins, a latex-sensitive individual, whether a health care worker or a patient, may experience minor symptoms, such as hives or nasal congestion. Severe cases may result in anaphylaxis (*an-uh-fuh-LAK-sis*). This is a dangerous reaction that causes a drop in blood pressure, difficulty breathing, swelling of the throat, tongue and nose, and even loss of consciousness. It could be life-threatening if unattended. Emergency medical attention is needed at the first sign of anaphylactic reaction.

Frequently Asked Questions

Am I at risk?

- Although anyone can develop an allergy to latex, the number of people who do is quite small considering the millions who are exposed every day to consumer products that contain natural rubber latex. Individuals with an increased risk are those who have spina bifida and have undergone numerous surgeries, those who are prone to allergies, health care workers, rubber industry workers and others who have regular, continuous contact with latex.

- If you have had a prior allergic reaction to latex-containing objects, consult your physician who can try to find the cause. Your physician also can determine the best strategy for dealing with a latex allergy. Until that is done, avoid contact with all latex products.
Inform your dentist's office staff so that your medical history can be updated and appropriate precautions can be taken before your next dental visit.

ADA Video

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