



Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust

Latex allergy: information for families

Latex comes from the sap of the tropical rubber tree (*Hevea Brasiliensis*). The sap is processed and used in many products we use every day. Some people are allergic to the protein in latex which is the substance that makes latex so elastic. Therefore, products which are stretchy, like balloons and gloves, are more likely to cause an allergic reaction than products which are solid, like car tyres.

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) explains about latex allergy and how you can find out which products contain latex. It also describes what to expect when your child comes to GOSH for treatment and work to reduce the amount of latex in use.

Coming into contact with tiny amounts of the latex protein causes the body to have an allergic reaction.

The symptoms vary from person to person. People with a latex allergy can develop symptoms immediately after being in contact with latex. However, some people have a delayed reaction which is more likely to be an itchy rash. These people are more likely to be allergic to other substances in rubber production rather than the latex itself.

The degree of allergic reaction also varies from person to person. Some people may have a mild reaction to latex, which might include itchy eyes, sneezing or a runny nose, or an itchy rash, while other people may have a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis.

Who can develop latex allergy?

Anyone can develop an allergy to latex, but it is more common in people who are exposed to latex regularly. It would seem that people with hay fever who are also in contact with latex regularly have an even higher risk of developing an allergy to latex.

People who are in contact with latex products on a regular basis include health care workers, people who work in the rubber industry and people who have had a lot of operations, especially during childhood. People with spina bifida and problems with their urinary system are also at a higher risk of developing latex allergy due to the number of medical products containing latex they use to manage their condition.

People who are allergic to certain foods may also be at risk of developing latex allergy. These foods include: bananas, avocados, kiwi fruit, mangoes, chestnuts, potatoes and tomatoes. These particular foods contain similar proteins to those found in latex.

How is latex allergy diagnosed?

A person is likely to be allergic to latex if they have a reaction occurring within half an hour of coming into contact with latex. Your doctor will probably confirm this using a skin prick test or a blood test which examines the number of antibodies in a small sample of blood.

How common is latex allergy?

The actual number of people with latex allergy in the UK is not known, but is growing. Studies here suggest that about 40 per cent of patients at GOSH have antibodies to latex, especially children with spina bifida or children who undergo multiple operations. Our research suggests that up to half of the remaining patients are at risk of reactions to latex. More people are being exposed to latex proteins which may explain the increase. In the general population, up to five per cent of people are believed to have an allergy to latex, although as they do not show any symptoms, they are probably unaware.

How can latex allergy be treated?

There is no cure for latex allergy as unfortunately at present it is not possible to desensitise people with latex allergy.

Practical Issues

People with latex allergy should avoid products containing latex. This will prevent their symptoms getting any worse. There are many lists of products containing latex available but as a general guide, you should try to avoid:

- latex or rubber dummies and baby bottle teats
- rubber stretching toys
- balloons
- rubber bands
- adhesive tape and bandages (not all types necessarily)
- condoms
- and other items such as carpet backing, some shower curtains, window insulation and clothing elastics.

In most cases, there are alternative products you can use. Latex balloons are banned at GOSH, but foil balloons are fine for a child with latex allergy.

All wards and departments at GOSH now use latex-free gloves. Latex-free condoms are widely available in most chemists.

If you are allergic to latex, it is important that you wear a medical alert bracelet or necklace. These are pieces of jewellery containing a telephone number which any doctor can ring to find out about your medical conditions. This avoids you being mistakenly treated using products containing latex.

Your medical records at GOSH, your local hospital, your dentist and your family doctor (GP) should also have a sticker on the front saying you are allergic to latex.

If you are highly allergic to latex, it may be worth carrying a set of sterile latex-free gloves, especially if you are travelling away from home. Hospitals and doctors in the UK are becoming more aware of latex allergy, but unfortunately the same may not be true of health care abroad.

If you suffer severe reactions to latex, that is, anaphylaxis, a doctor may recommend for you to always carry a pre-loaded epinephrine syringe.

What is the outlook for people with latex allergy?

If the suggestions above are followed, there is no reason why someone with latex allergy should not have a full and enjoyable life.

Further information and support

Visit the Latex Allergy Sufferers Forum website at www.lasg-forum.co.uk/post/YaBB.pl

The Anaphylaxis Campaign also runs a helpline - 01252 542 029 - open from Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm. You can also visit their website at www.anaphylaxis.org.uk