

## Latex Allergy

### What is latex allergy?

Latex allergy is a reaction that some people have to certain proteins in natural latex rubber (some types of synthetic rubber are called "latex," but these do not contain the proteins that cause the allergy).

In persons sensitized to the latex proteins, symptoms can occur within minutes of exposure or can occur hours later. Symptoms can also vary by individual. Mild forms of the reaction can involve skin redness, rashes, hives, or itching. More serious reactions can involve respiratory symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, and asthma (difficult breathing, coughing spells, and wheezing). In rare situations, shock can occur, but, a life-threatening reaction is usually not the first sign of latex allergy.

### Who is at risk?

Dental workers are at risk of developing latex allergy because they tend to use latex gloves frequently. Workers with less frequent glove use (such as housekeepers, hairdressers, and workers in industries that manufacture latex products) are also at risk.

### How is latex allergy treated?

Early detection of symptoms, reduction of exposure to latex, and prompt medical advice are important to prevent long-term health effects. Once someone is sensitized to latex, he or she must take special precautions to prevent exposure. Medication can reduce the allergy symptoms, but prevention of exposure to the latex proteins is the most effective.

### What are other latex health effects?

The most common reaction to latex is irritant contact dermatitis. This is not a true allergy, but is dry, itchy, irritated areas on the skin, usually the hands. This irritation is caused by wearing gloves and by exposure to the powders added to them.

Allergic contact dermatitis (sometimes called chemical sensitivity dermatitis) comes from the chemicals added to latex during the glove manufacturing process. These chemicals can cause a skin rash similar to that of poison ivy. Like irritant contact dermatitis, chemical sensitivity dermatitis is not a true allergy.

### How can I protect myself?

1. Use non-latex gloves for activities not likely to involve contact with infectious materials (food preparation, housekeeping, maintenance, etc.).
  - Appropriate barrier protection is necessary when handling infectious materials. If you choose latex gloves, **use powder-free gloves with reduced protein content.**

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- “Hypoallergenic” latex gloves do not reduce the risk of latex allergy, although they may reduce reactions to chemical additives in the latex.
2. Use appropriate work practices to reduce the chance of reactions to latex.
    - When wearing latex gloves, do not use oil-based hand creams or lotions (which can cause glove deterioration).
    - Wash hands after removing latex gloves.
    - Practice good housekeeping: frequently clean areas and equipment contaminated with latex-containing dust.
  3. Follow latex allergy education and training provided by your employer, and follow procedures for minimizing latex exposure.
  4. Learn to recognize the symptoms of latex allergy: skin rash; hives; flushing; itching; nasal, eye, or sinus symptoms; asthma; and (rarely) shock.

For further information or assistance, contact your Zenith Safety & Health consultant.