

- **WHAT IS "NATURAL" LATEX?**

Natural Latex is a specific type of rubber manufactured from the white, milky sap of rubber trees.

During the process of manufacturing latex products, various chemicals are added to enhance its properties (preservatives, strengthening agents, etc.). Natural Latex is used in a wide variety of medical products such as gloves, catheters, bandages, IV Tubing, etc. and also in many common household products such as hot water bottles, condoms, balloons, etc.

- **WHY IS LATEX SUCH A PROBLEM NOW?**

Use of latex products has been steadily increasing over the years. In the Health Care Field the evolution of Body Substance Precautions in the 1980's resulted in an increased demand for latex gloves. It is thought that in an effort to meet increased world wide demand for latex gloves, many manufacturers became less stringent in processing the natural latex. Residual proteins present in the latex are believed to be responsible for initially sensitizing frequently exposed individuals. It is generally believed that increased glove usage coupled with varying grades of glove quality have contributed to more people developing sensitivities to latex.

- **WHO IS AT RISK OF DEVELOPING LATEX SENSITIVITIES?**

Those people who are at increased risk are people who are exposed frequently to natural rubber latex, i.e. Health Care Workers, Patients having multiple surgeries, latex manufacturers, etc.

Predisposing factors can include other skin conditions or other allergies, (particularly some food allergies, i.e. bananas, avocados, chestnuts, kiwi, and others). People who have experienced symptoms such as itching, hives, swelling or wheezing after using rubber products at home or work should be suspicious of latex sensitivity.

- **HOW DOES THE PROBLEM PRESENT ITSELF?**

The reaction to latex gloves is divided into four categories:

### **IRRITANT CONTACT DERMATITIS**

This is not an actual allergic reaction, but rather a skin sensitivity that presents as dry, flaky skin with cracks and sores. This can be a result of perspiration of gloved hands, chemical additives, residual soaps or just the gloves aggravating pre-existing dermatitis.

- **ALLERGIC CONTACT DERMATITIS**

(Type IV delayed, cell mediated hypersensitivity.)

A skin rash that appears 2-4 days after using the gloves. Redness and swelling can last several days. Over time, the skin becomes dry, crusted and thickened with hard bumps and sores. This can be a result of allergies to the chemical additives in the gloves or ongoing exposure to other irritants.

- **LOCAL ALLERGIC REACTION**

(Type I IgE mediated, involves antibody production against proteins in latex.)

Localized itching followed by hives within 5-60 minutes after wearing gloves or having contact with latex products. Symptoms usually disappear within ½ hr. to 2 hrs. after the latex source is removed.

- **SYSTEMIC ALLERGIC REACTION**

(Type I, IgE mediated response.)

Symptoms as for local reaction plus rhinitis, conjunctivitis, shortness of breath. This most severe form of latex allergy can be life threatening. Symptoms can progress quickly from respiratory in nature to complete shock (anaphylaxis), and possible death, failing success of emergency treatment.



## **WHAT CAN HEALTH CARE WORKERS DO ABOUT THE PROBLEM?**

If you are suspicious that latex might be a problem for you, please notify the Health and Safety Department @ ext. 2402.

Whether you personally have a problem or not, you can help reduce risk to yourself and others by using the appropriate gloves for the task.

Vinyl gloves offer an appropriate barrier when prolonged exposure to blood/body fluids is not expected (i.e. emptying catheters, drains, suction bottles, etc.)

Latex gloves are an appropriate barrier when longer exposure to blood/body fluids is expected, or when finger dexterity is required (i.e. during surgery, trauma cases, deliveries, etc.) Choose a non-powdered latex glove, if possible.

Remember that no glove is foolproof. Vinyl and Latex Gloves will both leak within certain time frames; therefore, gloves should never replace handwashing!

The Hospital will continue to assess new products and provide good quality latex and vinyl gloves. Your conscientious use of latex products will lessen the risk to yourself, your co-workers and the patients we service.

*For more information, please call the Health and Safety Office at extension #2402.*

**THE  
TRUTH ABOUT  
LATEX**