

SENSITIVITY TO LATEX INFORMATION & GUIDELINES

The Use of Latex

Latex is a durable, flexible material which gives a high protection from many micro-organisms. For this reason Latex has been used in the production of many nursing and household products. Latex can also cause a skin irritation or a more severe reaction to those who have sensitivity to it.

All DRH staff must use an alternative to Latex gloves, unless a risk assessment has been undertaken for their use, in specific circumstances.

The following is a list of common equipment which may also have a significant latex content:

- Adhesive tape
- Ambu bags
- BP cuffs
- Colostomy products
- Condom type continence aids
- Dressings and bandages
- Protective sheets
- Rubber gloves
- Syringes
- Urinary catheters

Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex (NRL)

Latex allergy is an allergic reaction to one or more of the components of natural rubber latex products. Reactions can range in severity from irritation to acute hypersensitivity which may lead to anaphylactic shock.

Irritation

This is a non-allergic condition, the effects of which are reversible. A typical symptom is the occurrence of a rash which is usually dry and itchy. Symptoms usually disappear once contact is discontinued, although if symptoms persist then advice should be sought from Occupational Health.

Hypersensitivity

This is an immunological reaction of the body which results in tissue damage, rather than contributing to repair or recovery. In all cases, the body has had previous contact with the allergen and the immune system has prepared a defense for the next encounter. Hypersensitivity occurs when the response is too strong. Hypersensitivity to NRL can take two forms:

Type 1 - Acute Hypersensitivity

This is usually caused as a result of reaction to the natural protein residue found in NRL. Although this form of reaction does not occur frequently, it can have severe consequences. These hypersensitivities are caused by water soluble proteins which are a naturally occurring part of latex.

Symptoms include:

- Local and systemic rashes
- Breathlessness
- Hypotension
- In extreme cases, anaphylactic shock

Type 2 - Delayed Hypersensitivity

These hypersensitivities are generally caused by chemicals used in the manufacture of latex products. Symptoms usually appear between 12-48 hours after contact with latex products and include:

- Skin irritation
- Dermatitis
- Eczema

Anaphylaxis

This is a condition of excessive sensitivity. Anaphylactic shock occurs within minutes of exposure to the allergen. It causes extreme and generalised allergic reaction in which widespread release of natural histamine causes swelling, constriction of the bronchioles of the lungs, heart failure and circulatory collapse. This can result in death.

Who is at Risk?

There are certain groups of people who may have an existing latex sensitivity or a predisposition to acquiring it, including:

- Healthcare workers
- People with a history of anaphylaxis caused by natural rubber latex
- People with a history of allergic reactions
- People with no previous history but who may be at risk due to other indicators, such as asthma, eczema or an allergy to foods such as nuts, tropical fruit, bananas (it should be noted that there is evidence of cross-reactivity of foods with latex allergens)
- People who have undergone multiple invasive surgical procedures, catheterisations and other invasive procedures

Minimising the Risk

The following advice is relevant to all staff using gloves for housekeeping, cleaning, kitchen work or personal care:

- Managers must make every effort to identify staff or service users that have a sensitivity to Latex.
- Staff members should inform their Manager if they have sensitivity to Latex
- Be aware of the risk of developing sensitivity to latex.
- Avoid the use of powdered latex gloves.
- Always use safer alternatives for example Nitrile or Vinyl gloves.

- Report any skin irritations to your Home Manager or Deputy for advice.
- Home managers will refer staff with related skin problems to Occupational Health.
- Wash hands after removing gloves.
- Avoid using oil-based emollients.
- Do not wear latex gloves unless their need has been assessed and they are essential to the procedure being carried out. Once the procedure is complete, take them off and wash hands as quickly as possible.
- Ensure a COSHH assessment is carried out to ensure that latex is not used in the manufacture of any product and, if possible, keep with the same product when purchasing further supplies.

After completing their assessment managers should identify and reduce all products containing Natural Rubber Latex within their home/hospital as much as possible.

References

Latex and You Published by the HSE

Latex Allergies available on www.hse.gov.uk/latex/law/htm accessed on 6/12/10