

## SENSITIVITY TO LATEX INFORMATION & GUIDELINES

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### **The Use of Latex**

Latex is used in the production of so many nursing and household products that it is almost impossible to avoid contact with it completely. Although synthetic materials are available as an alternative, they do not provide the same elasticity and comfort as gloves that are made of natural rubber latex.

The following is a list of common equipment which has a significant latex content:

- \* Adhesive tape
- \* Ambu bags
- \* BP cuffs
- \* Colostomy products
- \* Condom type continence aids
- \* Elasticated 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 residents care:

- \* Be aware of the risk of developing a sensitivity to latex
- \* Always avoid using powdered latex gloves, consider a vinyl alternative
- \* Do not accept low cost as a reason for using inferior quality gloves
- \* Report any skin irritation to your Home Manager or Deputy for immediate advice
- \* Wash hands after removing gloves
- \* Avoid using oil-based emollients
- \* Do not wear latex gloves unless 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.