

Latex Allergy Frequently Asked Questions

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Q 1: What is latex and how does it cause allergy?

Latex or natural rubber comes from the sap of the *Hevea brasiliensis* tree. When it is processed, preservatives, stabilisers and other chemicals are added. Sometimes cornstarch (or another powder) is added to the surface of the latex to prevent it from sticking to itself.

Allergic reactions can occur to latex protein as well as the chemicals added to it.

Cornstarch does not cause allergy, but it can spread latex protein.

Most people who are allergic to latex have had lots of contact with latex over many years (such as health care workers or people who have had many operations). Many people with latex allergy usually already have other allergic diseases like asthma, allergic rhinitis (hay fever) or eczema.

Q 2: What products contain latex?

Many commercial products contain natural rubber latex including:

- Bandages
- Baby bottle teats
- Baby dummies
- Rubber bands
- Clothing elastic
- Rubber toys
- Rubber grips
- Medical equipment

Allergic reactions usually occur after exposure to products such as gloves, balloons and condoms which are made through a process called dipping.

Products made from crepe latex rubber (like shoe soles), which are made using a different process, are unlikely to cause allergic reactions.

Q 3: Can synthetic rubber cause a latex allergy?

Synthetic rubber is made from petrochemicals and does not contain latex proteins.

Products containing synthetic rubber (like most latex paints), do not cause latex allergy.

Q 4: What allergic reactions can latex cause?

Immediate allergic reactions (also known as Type 1 or IgE antibody mediated), are the most serious adverse reactions to latex. Reactions can occur in people who have an allergy to latex, because the body produces chemicals including histamine. This can cause:

- Itching and hives (urticaria) when someone has direct contact with latex (such as wearing rubber gloves).
- Itchy and swollen lips, face or tongue after blowing up balloons.
- Irritation after wearing a condom or inserting a diaphragm for contraceptive purposes.
- Irritation after visiting the dentist or hairdresser who may use products containing latex.

When latex is inhaled, it can cause allergic rhinitis or asthma-like symptoms. This occurs most commonly in hospitals where latex proteins can be carried on powder from gloves which can spread through the air.

Anaphylaxis is the most severe allergic reaction to latex. Symptoms include severe difficulty in breathing and a drop in blood pressure. This usually occurs in very sensitive patients when latex protein is absorbed quickly into the body through moist surfaces, such as the mouth, nose, throat, vagina, rectum or internally (such as during a surgical operation).

Latex can also cause allergic contact dermatitis (a skin reaction).

Q 5: What skin reactions can latex cause?

Irritant dermatitis

Most reactions to latex are irritant dermatitis, which is not an immediate allergic reaction. It causes rough, dry and scaly skin, and sometimes weeping sores. Sweating and friction under rubber gloves can make this worse.

Allergic contact dermatitis

Allergic contact dermatitis is the most common immune system reaction to latex:

- Symptoms can look similar to those of irritant dermatitis (with rough, dry and scaly skin and sometimes weeping sores), but the cause is different.
- Symptoms usually occur 12-48 hours after contact with latex rubber.
- Reactions are mostly due to the chemicals added to rubber but may also result from contact with latex protein.
- Allergic contact dermatitis is annoying but not dangerous. However, ongoing absorption of latex through damaged skin (such as irritant or contact dermatitis) increases the risk of developing latex allergy. It is therefore important to identify and treat these skin conditions if they occur.

Q 6: Can people with latex allergy have issues with foods?

Some proteins in latex are also found in foods:

- Some people with latex allergy find that certain foods cause an itchy mouth or throat swelling.
- The most common foods that can cause this are banana, avocado, kiwifruit, passionfruit, plums, strawberry and tomato.
- These foods do not need to be avoided unless they cause problems.

Q 7: How is latex allergy diagnosed?

Latex allergy is diagnosed through a combination of history taking and tests for sensitivity to latex protein and/or chemical preservatives. The types of tests commonly used are skin tests or blood tests for allergen specific IgE. Patch tests are used to diagnose contact allergic dermatitis.

You may be referred to a clinical immunology/allergy specialist for testing.

So-called allergy tests, including vega testing, alcat tests, kinesiography, pulse testing and Rinkel's intradermal testing, are not proven methods to confirm any form of allergy.

Q 8: How is latex allergy managed?

If you are latex allergic you should:

- **Avoid latex** in all its forms, and particularly avoid latex coming near your skin, face, eyes, nose or throat. Latex substitutes can be used if needed.
- **Be aware that some condoms and diaphragms** contain latex and should be avoided. Latex-free condoms can be used.
- **Wear or carry medical identification**, stating you are allergic to latex which can be used by emergency health professionals if you are unconscious or confused.
- **Carry your own supply of non-latex gloves (such as vinyl or synthetic rubber)**, in case of an emergency.
- **Tell doctors and dentists** well before any surgical operation, dental treatment, Pap smear, blood tests or x-ray to ensure that latex is not used.
- **Use vinyl or synthetic rubber gloves**, if you need to wear gloves.
- **Avoid takeaway food** that is prepared or served by people wearing latex gloves.
- **Consider avoiding occupations where latex is very difficult to avoid** such as nursing, dentistry, medicine, veterinary science, hairdressing or food preparation or service.

Q 9: What should people do if they are exposed to latex as a part of their work or study?

If you have a latex allergy and your work or study involves frequent exposure to latex, you should:

- **Use latex free gloves.**
- **Request that non-powdered latex gloves** be used by others around you as powder can carry latex in the air.

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