

Natural Rubber Latex Allergy

People with Spina Bifida are at high risk for latex allergy.

What is Natural Rubber Latex?

Natural rubber latex (NRL) is a milky substance tapped from the *Hevea Brasiliensis* (a tropical rubber tree). It can be heated and molded into hard rubber products like tires; or it can be dipped to make softer products like balloons or medical examination gloves.

What is latex allergy?

Latex allergy means that a person is allergic to proteins in the natural rubber latex. Although anyone can develop a latex allergy, it is thought to be caused by significant long term exposure to latex proteins that are released during processing of the rubber. The amount of latex exposure needed to produce sensitization or an allergic reaction is unknown, but softer rubber dipped products that have been processed longer (like gloves and balloons) are seen as more allergenic; and frequent exposure to latex products increases the risk of developing a sensitivity.

People who have Spina Bifida and catheterize; or have several surgeries from very early in life, such as bladder surgery or shunt revisions, are at very high risk for allergy because of a "cumulative" effect over time. Symptoms of latex sensitivity can be minor, but without warning, may become life threatening. Many people are unaware that they are sensitized to latex because the symptoms can be vague and non-specific. Those people are at risk for a serious reaction.

What are the symptoms of latex allergy?

- Itching
- Skin redness, hives or rash
- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Itchy, watery eyes
- Scratchy, hoarse throat
- Cough
- Wheezing and shortness of breath (asthma)

The most serious allergic reaction to latex is anaphylaxis, a type of shock. An anaphylactic response to latex is a medical emergency.

Other signs and symptoms include:

- Difficulty breathing caused by swelling of lips, tongue or windpipe
- Severe drop in blood pressure (hypotension)
- Dizziness
- Loss of consciousness
- Confusion
- Slurred speech
- Rapid or weak pulse
- Blue hue of the skin, including lips and nail beds
- Diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting





Latex items

Because of its low cost, durability and versatility, natural latex has been widely used in the United States for over a century; and is used in the production of many common items. Although most medical products are labeled, household or recreational items which contain latex may not be labeled. For that reason, the American Latex Allergy Association and the Spina Bifida Association work diligently to keep a current list of products that contain latex; and their “safe” (non-latex) alternatives.

What are cross reactions to latex allergy?

People allergic to latex may also be allergic to the proteins in some fruits and vegetables. Some of them include: banana, avocado, chestnut, kiwi, apple, carrot, celery, papaya, potato, tomato, melon, and avocado. Due to nutritional risks, people should not avoid eating these foods unless they have had a reaction to them and are advised by a dietary or medical professional to avoid them.

What steps should I take to prevent developing latex allergy?

The best way to prevent developing latex allergy is to avoid contact with latex or latex-contaminated powder. Contact occurs through contact with skin, inhaling latex proteins, or internally through medical procedures or surgery, when latex touches the skin, mouth, eyes, genital areas or bladder. Severe reactions can occur if latex enters the bloodstream. Powder from latex balloons or gloves gets into the air. Therefore, people with Spina Bifida are at high risk for latex allergy and should avoid exposure to natural latex products from birth. Products made of silicone, plastic, nitrile or vinyl can be used instead.

Those who have had a serious reaction to latex should:

- Wear a medic alert bracelet or necklace
- Carry auto-injectable epinephrine; and
- Carry non-latex gloves and other non-latex medical items for emergencies.

Discuss latex allergy-avoidance and develop an Action Plan with health care providers, schools, day care, camps, visitors and anyone else who is involved with the person who has Spina Bifida.

Additional resources

www.aaaai.org

www.latexallergyresources.org

www.osha.gov/SLTC/latexallergy

This information does not constitute medical advice for any individual. As specific cases may vary from the general information presented here, SBA advises readers to consult a qualified medical or other professional on an individual basis.