

Latex allergy

There is a steady increase in the number of reported cases of asthma and skin complaints attributed to latex, particularly among health care and laboratory workers. Laboratory workers (includes teaching assistants, animal handlers, graduate and undergraduate students and anyone at UCI with "hands-on" laboratory experience) who experience skin problems which may be due to the wearing of latex gloves should seek help from the EH&S Occupational Health Coordinator at occhlth@uci.edu or call 949-824-6200.

What is latex?

The term "latex" refers to natural rubber latex, the product manufactured from a milky fluid derived from the rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Several types of synthetic rubber are also referred to as "latex" but these do not release the proteins that cause allergic reactions.

What is latex allergy?

Latex allergy is a reaction to certain proteins in latex rubber. The amount of latex exposure needed to produce sensitization or an allergic reaction is unknown. Increasing the exposure to latex proteins increases the risk of developing allergic symptoms. In sensitized persons, symptoms usually begin within minutes of exposure; but they can occur hours later and can be quite varied. Mild reactions to latex involve skin redness, rash, hives, or itching. More severe reactions may involve respiratory symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, and asthma (difficult breathing, coughing spells, and wheezing). Rarely, shock may occur; however, a life-threatening reaction is seldom the first sign of latex allergy.

Who is at risk of developing latex allergy?

Health care and laboratory workers are at risk of developing latex allergy because they use latex gloves frequently. Workers with less glove use (such as custodial workers, hairdressers, and workers in industries that manufacture latex products) are also at risk.

Is skin contact the only type of latex exposure?

No. Latex proteins become fastened to the lubricant powder used in some gloves. When workers change gloves, the protein/powder particles become airborne and can be inhaled.

How is latex allergy treated?

Detecting symptoms early, reducing exposure to latex and obtaining medical advice are important to prevent long-term health effects. Once a worker becomes allergic to latex, special precautions are needed to prevent exposures. Certain medications may reduce the allergy symptoms but complete latex avoidance, though quite difficult, is the most effective approach.

Are there other types of reactions to latex besides latex allergy?



Yes. The most common reaction to latex products is **irritant contact dermatitis**. This is the development of dry, chapped, itchy and/or cracked skin; sometimes this will begin with the skin turning red, in the irritated areas of the skin, usually the hands. This reaction is caused by irritation from wearing gloves and by exposure to the powders added to the gloves. Irritant contact dermatitis is not a true allergy.

Allergic contact dermatitis (sometimes called chemical sensitivity dermatitis) results from the chemicals added to latex during harvesting, processing, or manufacturing. These chemicals can cause a skin rash similar to that of poison ivy.



How can I protect myself from latex allergy?

Take the following steps to protect yourself from latex exposure and allergy in the workplace:

1. Use other types of gloves that do not contain latex such as nitrile.
2. Supervisors and teaching assistants **should ensure that alternatives to latex gloves are available in laboratories and that laboratory workers understand the circumstances under which different types of gloves should be used.**
3. When using latex gloves, choose powder-free gloves with reduced protein content.
4. Use appropriate work practices to reduce the chance of reactions to latex.
 - When wearing latex gloves, do not use oil-based hand creams or lotions (which can cause glove deterioration).
 - After removing latex gloves, wash hands with a mild soap and dry thoroughly.
 - Practice good housekeeping: frequently clean areas and equipment contaminated with latex-containing dust.
5. Take advantage of the free medical evaluation as an official diagnosis of latex allergy is made by a licensed physician who uses medical history, a physical exam and various laboratory and clinical tests. Testing alone is insufficient to make a diagnosis.
6. Learn to recognize the symptoms of latex allergy: skin rash; hives; flushing; itching; nasal, eye, or sinus symptoms; asthma; and (rarely) shock.

What if I think I have latex allergy?

If you develop symptoms of latex allergy, avoid direct contact with latex gloves and other latex-containing products until you can see a physician experienced in treating latex allergy.

If you have latex allergy, consult your physician regarding the following precautions:

- Avoid contact with latex gloves and products.
- Avoid areas where you might inhale the powder from latex gloves worn by other workers.
- Tell your employer and health care providers (physicians, nurses, dentists, etc.) that you have latex allergy.

Additional Information:

<https://www.aaaai.org/conditions-and-treatments/allergies/latex-allergy.aspx>

<http://www.cdc.gov/OralHealth/infectioncontrol/faq/latex.htm>