

Latex Allergy Fact Sheet

HS02-044C (09-24)

Imagine slipping on a pair of gloves only to find your hands itching, your nose running, and your breath shortening. This is a reality for millions of workers.¹

Latex allergy was first recognized in the late 1970s.² Since then, it has become a major health concern as an increasing number of people in the workplace are affected. The percentage of workers with a latex allergy varies by occupation, but it is more common in professions that are frequently exposed to latex products, such as:

- **Health care workers:** Up to 17% of healthcare workers may be affected by latex allergies. However, latex allergy varies by role, with nearly 30% of dentists, 50% of surgeons, and 15% of the remaining medical staff showing symptoms.³
- **Restaurant workers:** About 17% of restaurant workers have been diagnosed with a latex allergy.⁴
- **Manufacturing workers:** At least 10% of workers who manufacture rubber products develop an allergy to latex.⁵

Latex allergies are rare in the general population, only affecting about 1% of people.⁶ However, how much someone is exposed to latex determines whether they might develop a latex allergy. Understanding latex allergies—their causes, symptoms, and alternatives—can help you safely and comfortably steer clear of the hazard.



Background

Latex is a natural rubber made from the sap of rubber trees. It has elastic properties that make it ideal for producing thin, stretchy materials like gloves. Latex gloves became widely used in industry settings in the 1980s as a barrier protection measure, most notably against bloodborne pathogens, particularly human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV).

What is a latex allergy?

A latex allergy is an immune system reaction to proteins found in natural rubber. Symptoms can range from mild skin irritation to severe anaphylaxis (a life-threatening allergic reaction). Other symptoms may include;

- Rash or hives.
- Itching.
- Sneezing.
- Runny nose.
- Watery eyes.
- Wheezing or difficulty breathing.
- Shock.

Latex is found in many supplies workers may use daily. Examples may include:

- **Medical and emergency equipment:**
 - Blood pressure cuffs.
 - Stethoscopes.
 - Disposable gloves.
 - Breathing tubes.
 - Dental dams.
 - Tourniquets.
 - IV tubing.
 - Syringes.
 - Surgical masks.
 - Anesthesia masks.
 - Catheters.
 - Wound drains.
 - Rubber tops on medicine vials.
- **Safety gear:**
 - Gloves.
 - Goggles.
 - Respirators.
 - Rubber aprons.
- **Office and school supplies:**
 - Rubber bands.
 - Erasers.
- **General industry products:**
 - Car tires.
 - Motorcycle handgrips.
 - Carpeting.
 - Goggles.
 - Shoe soles.
 - Dishwashing gloves.
 - Expandable fabrics.
- **Child care supplies:**
 - Pacifiers.
 - Baby bottle nipples.
 - Balloons.

Who is at risk?

Those at highest risk for developing latex allergies include:

- Workers in industries using latex products regularly.
- People who have had multiple surgeries.
- Those with other allergies or asthma.

Is skin contact the only type of latex exposure?

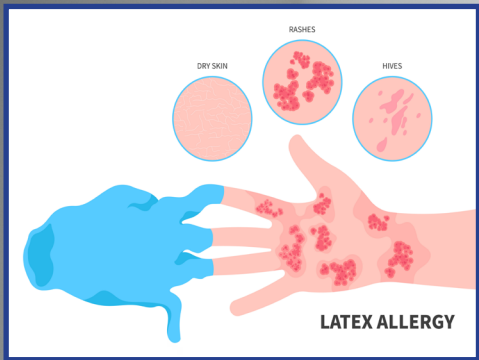
No. Some gloves or other latex products contain powder that carries latex proteins. These particles can become airborne and inhaled.

How to prevent an allergic reaction

- Use non-latex gloves when possible. Several latex-free alternatives include:
 - Nitrile gloves.
 - Vinyl gloves.
 - Neoprene gloves.
 - Polyisoprene gloves.
- If you must use latex gloves, choose powder-free ones, which have less latex protein.
- Do not use oil-based hand creams, which can cause latex gloves to deteriorate.
- Wash and dry your hands well after removing latex gloves.
- Keep your workspace clean, especially in areas with latex dust.

	POLY	LATEX	NEOPRENE	VINYL	NITRILE
General		✓		✓	✓
Food Prep	✓	✓		✓	✓
Cooking		✓		✓	✓
Counter Tasks		✓		✓	✓
Dishwashing		✓		✓	✓
Janitorial		✓		✓	✓
Exam		✓			✓
High Risk			✓		
Powder or Powder-Free		✓		✓	✓
Latex Free	✓		✓	✓	✓

CAUTION: The latex protein has potential to cause allergic reactions.



What if you have a latex allergy?

- Spot symptoms early.
- Avoid latex products.
- Stay away from areas where others are using latex products.
- Tell your employer about your allergy.
- Get medical advice. Some medicines can reduce symptoms.
- Wear a medical alert bracelet.

Employer responsibilities

Employers should:

- Provide non-latex gloves when possible.
- Offer low-protein, powder-free latex gloves when needed.

- Keep the workplace clean and free of latex dust.
- Educate workers about latex allergy.
- Screen high-risk workers for symptoms.
- Review prevention strategies if a worker develops an allergy.
- Comply with OSHA general industry standards that address latex allergy. (See www.osha.gov/latex-allergy/standards.)

By taking these precautions, workers can minimize their risk of developing latex allergies while maintaining the needed personal protection.

References

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- ³ American Dental Association, "Latex Allergy," Website. [https://www.ada.org/resources/ada-library/oral-health-topics/latex-allergy#:~:text=Latex%20allergy%20\(type%20%20%5Bimmediate,12%20percent%20of%20healthcare%20workers](https://www.ada.org/resources/ada-library/oral-health-topics/latex-allergy#:~:text=Latex%20allergy%20(type%20%20%5Bimmediate,12%20percent%20of%20healthcare%20workers). Accessed September 19, 2024.
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- ⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "NIOSH Alert on Work-Related Latex Allergy Recommends Steps to Reduce Exposures." Webpage. https://archive.cdc.gov/www_cdc.gov/niosh/updates/latexpr.html#:~:text=At%20least%207.7%20million%20people%20are%20employed,to%20experience%20the%20effects%20of%20latex%20allergy. Accessed September 19, 2024.



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