

Latex Information for Staff

The Hazard

The proteins in natural rubber latex can cause allergy resulting in a range of effects: anaphylactic reactions, asthma and skin problems. Common latex products include: gloves, catheters, stethoscopes, condoms, elasticated bandages, wound drains, and many non-clinical products. It is progressively being eliminated from clinical equipment but this is incomplete. The accelerators used in the manufacture of latex products can also cause allergy.

Types of Reaction

There are two types of allergy associated with latex: Type I and Type IV.

A small proportion of people develop severe Type I immediate hypersensitivity including anaphylaxis (potentially fatal) asthma, allergic rhinitis, or less severe urticaria – skin reactions. A person who develops Type I hypersensitivity will have further reactions on subsequent exposure to latex. Patients particularly at risk include those with spina bifida and anyone undergoing repeated treatment with latex equipment. Strong atopics and those with existing allergy to some foods: kiwi, avocado and chestnuts are also more likely to develop Type I latex allergy.

Type IV allergy usually produces skin reactions. These problems are similar to the irritant dermatitis caused by combinations of frequent hand washing, alcohol gel, cleaning agents and prolonged glove use. Type IV dermatitis may take years of exposure before it appears; once someone has it, subsequent reactions are often delayed by up to 24 hours after exposure.

Most Type IV reactions are to the accelerators used in most disposable gloves rather than to latex. Glove-related skin problems may therefore not be resolved by switching to non-latex. Occupational health advice may be required to find a suitable glove which is manufactured using no, or different, accelerators.

Gloves

In the past, most latex exposure resulted from gloves. The NHS Lothian Glove Selection Policy now sets the principle that gloves should be non-latex so far as is reasonably practicable. All non-sterile gloves are non-latex (unless prescribed for an individual by occupational health). Sterile gloves should be nitrile exam gloves, unless prolonged use or the need for maximum dexterity necessitates surgeons' gloves. The surgeons' gloves currently supplied are latex unless a sensitised staff member or patient necessitates the use of non-latex as described in the NHS Lothian Policy for Protection Against Adverse Reactions to Latex.

Summary

For patient safety:

- Follow the procedures established for the care and treatment of latex sensitive patients
- Be vigilant for the signs and symptoms of latex sensitivity in patients.
- Report immediately any signs of patient sensitivity.

For staff safety:

- Be vigilant for the signs and symptoms of latex sensitivity in yourself.
- Report any symptoms of possible latex sensitivity including skin or sinus problems, or any breathing problems to the Occupational Health Service.
- Follow their advice to avoid future adverse reactions.
- Use gloves only when required. Remove them when the task is finished.
- Wash hands after removing gloves to remove residues.