

Latex Glove Allergies and the Food Industry

What is Latex Allergy?

Latex allergy is the term used to describe a type of reaction that occurs in some sensitive individuals if exposed to proteins found in natural rubber latex. Persons suffering from latex allergy may experience mild symptoms such as red, itchy, dry skin or more severe symptoms such as difficult breathing and in rare situations – anaphylactic shock. The severity of reactions is dependent upon individual sensitivity to latex. Once an individual has developed latex allergy, it can worsen with further exposure to latex.

What Products Contain Latex?

Latex can be made into a variety of products. Products containing latex include, but are not limited to gloves, rubber bands, car tires, balloons, carpet and shoe soles. Certain products such as gloves and balloons are dipped in latex. These dipped latex products have accounted for the majority of reactions to date.

Who is at Risk?

Because it is difficult to determine who is sensitive, those individuals most exposed to latex are at a higher risk of developing an allergic reaction. Workers in professions that demand the constant and daily use of gloves such as doctors, nurses, dentists and other health care professionals account for the majority of reactions to date. Eight to twelve percent of the 7.7 million health care workers in the United States have been found to be latex sensitive. In comparison, only one to six percent of the general population is sensitized. Workers who use latex gloves less frequently such as food service personnel, fire fighters, painters and many others may be at risk for developing the allergy. In addition, certain individuals with pre-existing conditions such as spina bifida have been found to be at increased risk.

What about Consumers with Severe Latex Allergies?

An increasing number of consumers appear to be latex sensitive. A published report indicates that latex proteins may be transferred from latex gloves to foods during preparation.¹ Latex sensitive consumers have been reported to have had allergic reactions after consuming foods contacted by latex gloves.^{2,3} Use of non-latex gloves would protect latex sensitive consumers.

Latex Glove Allergies and the Food Industry

Recommendations for Use of Latex Gloves in the Workplace

1. The National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOSH) recommends that food workers use non-latex gloves. A wide variety of alternatives exist including polyvinylchloride, neoprene, styrene or synthetic.
2. If latex gloves are used, provide employees powder free, reduced protein gloves. Powdered gloves pose a greater risk than non-powdered gloves. Latex proteins bond to the powder causing more latex to reach the skin. In addition, particles can become airborne when gloves are donned by employees. The powder may be inhaled by an allergic individual possibly causing an adverse reaction.
3. If employees are wearing latex gloves, recommend that they not use oil-based hand creams or lotions. These products can cause glove deterioration exacerbating the allergy.
4. Employers should encourage employees to wash hands with a mild soap and dry thoroughly after removing latex gloves.

Information expressed above comes from:

1. Beezhold D, Reschke J, Allen K, Kostyal D. Latex protein: A hidden food allergen. *Allergy Asthma Proc* 2000 Sep-Oct;21(5):301-8.
2. Franklin W, Pandolfo J. Latex as a Food Allergen. *Correspondence in the New England Journal of Medicine*, Dec 9, 1999 Vol.341, No 24.
3. Schwartz HJ. Latex: A potential hidden “food” allergen in fast food restaurants.
4. NIOSH Alert: Preventing Allergic Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace. June 1997 www.cdc.gov/niosh/latexalt.html
5. US HHS NIOSH Latex Allergy: A Prevention Guide www.cdc.gov/niosh/98-113.html
6. American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology Patient/Public Resource Center – Tip 29: Latex Allergy. Copyright 1996 – 1998. www.aaaai.org/public/publicedmat/tips/latexallergy.stm