Dear Alice,

Can you tell us about latex allergies?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Whether you realize it or not, items that contain latex are all around you! This natural rubber product is used in many different products such as medical supplies, baby bottles, condoms, and clothing waistbands — and that’s just a small sample! Because latex is so commonly used, it’s crucial to know how to recognize allergy symptoms (which can vary based on the type of reaction) and how to treat them. And though there are treatments, there is no cure for latex allergies. However, there are a number of strategies that can be utilized to ward off undesirable reactions to this material.

Latex products are made from processing a sap from the rubber tree, *hevea brasiliensis*. The proteins in this sap are believed to cause a reaction, especially when there is repeated exposure. Latex can cause three types of reactions:

- **Irritant contact dermatitis** is the most common reaction to latex, but it’s not actually an allergy. It’s primarily caused by an irritation of the skin from repeated use of latex gloves. It can also be caused by frequent handwashing or contact with cleaners and sanitizers (so, this condition isn’t always caused by latex, but it can be). Symptoms generally appear gradually over several days, but exposure to strong irritants can produce more immediate reactions in some people. Symptoms include dry or scaly skin, redness, mild itching, and cracking of the skin.

- **Allergic contact dermatitis (delayed hypersensitivity)** is a sensitivity to chemicals added to latex en route to becoming a final product. These chemicals cause skin reactions similar to those caused by poison ivy. The symptoms appear within 6 to 48 hours and can include redness, severe itching, swelling, blisters that ooze a clear fluid, and crusting. Though it may appear that the symptoms of the reaction spread or become contagious, they may simply reach body parts at different times depending on a number of factors (e.g., skin thickness and amount of chemical exposure on different body parts).

- **Latex allergy (immediate hypersensitivity)** is the most severe reaction and can be triggered by even the smallest amount of exposure. This condition develops when an individual comes in contact with certain latex proteins that induce sensitivity — even latex
that sticks to the powder used in latex gloves and then becomes airborne can trigger a reaction. Symptoms can appear within minutes or hours and range from mild (redness, swelling, hives, or itching) to severe (runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, difficulty breathing, coughing, and wheezing). In some severe cases, anaphylaxis \[^2\] may occur.

Individuals who may be at high risk for latex allergies include those who:

- Are in frequent contact with latex including health care workers, rubber industry workers, housekeepers, hairdressers, and food service workers.
- Have had multiple surgeries, especially early in life.
- Have spina bifida \[^3\], a birth defect of the central nervous system.
- Have urogenital abnormalities.
- Are atopic, meaning tend to have multiple allergic reactions.
- Are allergic to certain kinds of food, especially avocados, bananas, chestnuts, kiwi fruits, papayas, potatoes, and tomatoes.

For those who suspect they are allergic to latex, especially those who react with symptoms following the use of condoms or diaphragms, are encouraged to speak with their health care provider. Although no U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved skin tests for latex allergy are currently available, an individual?s blood may be tested for specific antibodies to determine if they have a latex allergy. Skin tests can, however, diagnose allergic contact dermatitis. Those found to be allergic to latex may be given medication to reduce symptoms, but there is no cure ? so the most effective tool is avoidance. The good news is that many products that contain latex are also made in non-latex forms (such as non-latex condoms made from polyurethane and polyisoprene \[^4\]).

If by chance a person does experience a severe allergic reaction to latex, they may require injectable epinephrine. This medication relaxes the muscles in a person?s airway and tightens up their blood vessels to help ward off life-threatening symptoms of a severe reaction. For those prone to these serious reactions, it?s recommended that they carry this medication with them at all times. And, though epinephrine may be a life-saving tool, it?s crucial to seek out emergency medical attention for people experiencing a severe reaction as well. Keep in mind that symptoms of serious latex allergy have the potential to develop suddenly, without any previous or clear indications. As such, another proactive approach for folks with latex allergies is to learn what products contain latex, locate non-latex alternatives if necessary, and be familiar with the signs and symptoms of a reaction.

Here?s to health information for the masses!

Alice!

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