

Latex allergy

Occupational
aspects of
management

Evidence-based guidance for
employees



Royal College
of Physicians
Setting higher medical standards



This leaflet is about what to do if you are allergic to latex used at work, and measures that can be taken to minimise any problems so that you can stay at work. It is written for employees and summarises evidence-based guidelines.*

*NHS Plus, Royal College of Physicians, Faculty of Occupational Medicine. *Latex allergy: occupational aspects of management. A national guideline.* London: RCP, 2008.

Introduction

Latex allergy (LA) is quite common and may lead to uncomfortable symptoms but it is rarely life threatening. Symptoms include itchy rash on the hands or other parts of the body; itchy, runny nose or eyes; wheezing and difficulty breathing. This leaflet is a guide to some of the things that can help you have fewer symptoms at work. In this guide, latex refers to natural rubber latex and not to synthetic (man-made) rubber.

Should I be at work with my symptoms?

If you are experiencing symptoms of latex allergy at work, it is important that you and your employer work towards creating a 'latex-safe environment'. This should take place as soon as possible so that your symptoms do not become worse because you carry on being exposed to latex.

Most individuals with LA can continue their work if a few changes are made to the work environment. You will need to be careful to avoid latex both in your work and home life, by not using latex-containing materials yourself and by avoiding areas where powdered latex gloves are still being used.

Many everyday items contain natural rubber. It is important that you learn to avoid the items that are most likely to trigger your symptoms. Generally, 'dipped' rubber products such as gloves, balloons and condoms are more likely to trigger symptoms than solid rubber products such as tyres. Lists of products that contain natural rubber latex are available on the Latex Allergy Support Group website (www.lasg.co.uk/latexallergy/latextlists.htm).

If you need to use gloves for your job, it is important that your employer provides you with suitable latex-free gloves. Your occupational health department or manager should be able to help you get these gloves.

You also need to work in environments where there is no latex dust, for example from powdered latex gloves, as this can trigger symptoms of latex-induced asthma in people with a history of LA. Your manager should encourage colleagues to keep your contact with latex dust to a minimum by using powder-free latex gloves or latex-free gloves.

What else could be considered in planning my future work?

You may wish to find out if your organisation has an up-to-date working policy on latex, and if not, you may be able to start one being developed and implemented. It is important that your co-workers understand your allergy and how to help you avoid natural rubber latex products.

Keep a positive frame of mind. Support from family, friends or others with the allergy may help you come to terms with your condition and manage your allergy better.

What problems can I expect?

Most employers should be able to make reasonable adjustments to your work to help your allergy. In rare cases, you and your employer may need to consider relocating you to another job within your organisation (redeployment). Occasionally, employers may not be aware of their responsibility to protect your health at work.

It is important to be aware of laws that are designed to protect you:

- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 places a legal duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments to your work to support your disability.
- Employers also have a duty under health and safety law to protect your health as far as they reasonably can. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 puts a general duty on employers to keep employees healthy and safe at work.
- The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002 places a duty on your employer to assess any substances used at work that are hazardous to health, including natural rubber latex (www.hse.gov.uk/latex/law.htm).

What if my symptoms continue?

Most people with LA can stay at work after small adjustments are made in the workplace. But some people with LA can no longer work because their symptoms are too severe.

If your illness was caused by your work, you may be able to claim compensation from your employer. You do not have to be unable to work to receive compensation. You may also be entitled to various social security benefits, work-related or otherwise, because of the restrictions placed on you by your allergy. More information is available from Jobcentre Plus (www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk).

For a full version of the guidelines for latex allergy, see www.nhsplus.nhs.uk/web/public/default.aspx?PageID=331

Other sources of information

British Association of Dermatologists Patient Information Gateway on Latex Allergy:

www.bad.org.uk/public/leaflets/bad_patient_information_gateway_leaflets/latex/

Further copies of these leaflets are available from NHS Plus:

Email:
nhsplus@nhs.net

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