

ASSIST INFORMATION SHEET:

Latex allergies in schools

The last few decades have seen an increase in allergies to latex¹. These allergic reactions develop in some people due to exposure to certain latex proteins and chemicals used in the manufacture of latex products.

In a school setting, items containing latex can be found across many departments and whilst frequent exposure is unlikely, latex allergies can be an issue for susceptible individuals. It is recommended that schools avoid or minimise the use of latex containing products to prevent the development of latex allergies in both staff and students.

Items containing latex in schools

The intent of this information sheet is to raise awareness of latex allergies and to encourage a sensible and a risk management approach to the use of latex products in schools. It is important to know which staff and students may be at risk, to know where latex products are used in schools and to have strategies in place to avoid or limit exposure especially when a person has been identified as having a latex allergy.

What is latex?

Latex is obtained from the sap of the rubber tree *Hevea brasiliensis*¹. Latex is put through a manufacturing process with various chemicals to produce commonly used rubber products such as disposable latex gloves and balloons. Latex is also referred to as natural rubber latex.

What is a latex allergy?

A latex allergy is a reaction to latex proteins and chemicals used in the manufacture of latex products and when contact is made with the skin or mucous membranes². During the manufacture of latex products such as balloons and gloves a dry powder, usually cornstarch, is added to prevent the rubber surfaces from sticking together. The allergy-causing proteins can stick to the cornstarch powder and can cause reactions in sensitive individuals when blowing up a balloon or breathing in the powder from the inside of latex gloves. The risk of developing allergic symptoms is also increased by frequent exposure to the latex proteins¹.

Who is at risk of developing a latex allergy?

- People who already experience allergies such as hay fever, asthma and eczema.
- People with certain food allergies in particular to banana, avocado, kiwi fruit and strawberries.
- People frequently exposed to latex products.
- People who have undergone multiple operations, such as those with spina bifida.

Signs and symptoms of a reaction to latex

Latex allergies can present in the form of skin irritation including redness, rash, hives and itching; itchy or watery eyes, asthma, swelling of the lips and face; respiratory symptoms, chest tightness and rarely, anaphylactic shock².

Risk management and prevention strategies

1. **Provide education and training to all school staff** to raise awareness about exposure to latex, how to recognise the symptoms of latex allergies and how to prevent and deal with allergic reactions. Include what to do in the case of an emergency.
2. **Identify staff and students** with a history of latex allergy or those who are at increased risk of developing a latex allergy and have health care plans for those at significant risk.
3. **Identify all products that contain latex and their location in the school.** This may include, but is not limited to:
 - **Classrooms/science laboratories:** disposable latex gloves, balloons, safety goggles, rubber bands, erasers, pipette filler bulbs.
 - **Sporting areas:** handles on racquets, rubber gym mats, balls, swimming caps/goggles.
 - **Cleaning/canteen/technology/home economics kitchens:** rubber gloves
 - **First aid (Sick bay, First Aid kits):** hot water bottles, disposable latex gloves, some Band-aids/bandages and adhesive tapes.
4. Limit exposure to latex products and use non-latex alternatives where practicable. For example, in the science area:
 - Substitute latex gloves with non-latex gloves such as vinyl or nitrile.
 - If choosing to use latex gloves select powder free products.
 - Minimise the use of latex balloons or consider the use of non-latex balloons such as Mylar® or foil balloons.
 - Purchase synthetic rubber instead of natural rubber items.
 - If a latex-free product is not available then an alternate activity may need to be considered.
 - Follow good hand hygiene practices. Wash hands after removing gloves/handling latex products.

References and further reading:

¹ Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA). 2015. *Latex allergy*.
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² Sydney Children's Hospital. 2014. *Latex allergy*. Factsheet.
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