What if I’m Found to be Latex Sensitive?

At present, there is no cure for latex allergy. Prevention, avoidance, and treatment of symptoms are the current options. Once an individual is diagnosed with latex allergy, special precautions should be taken in all areas: at work, at home, and when undergoing dental or medical care.

Although certain medications may reduce allergic symptoms, avoidance of natural rubber latex is the most effective approach. If you are diagnosed with natural rubber latex allergy, it is important to notify your supervisor and your medical and dental care providers immediately.

Because emergency medical equipment and supplies typically contain latex, an individual with latex allergy should wear a medical alert symbol at all times to lessen the risk of life-threatening anaphylactic shock during critical care. Many medical facilities and emergency response teams have latex-safe alternatives for individuals who are sensitive; the key is identifying these individuals. Wearing a medical alert emblem will ensure identification of your sensitivity.

For information on latex allergy testing contact your LabCorp representative, local LabCorp facility, or call Allergy customer service at 800-222-7566 ext 63097

How can I Protect Myself?

Use the appropriate glove for the hazard. When engaged in activities in which exposure to biological hazards is unlikely, use nonlatex gloves. These activities include cleaning, food handling, and sorting through paperwork.

To reduce exposure to latex protein and avoid the risk of latex allergy, use powder-free, low-protein, latex gloves when handling biological agents. Hypoallergenic labels found on latex gloves do not certify reduced risk of developing latex allergy; they refer to the level of chemical additives in the gloves that may be associated with contact dermatitis. The FDA now requires manufacturers to remove these labels to avoid this confusion.

Use Appropriate Skin Care Practices. Wash your hands before and after wearing gloves of any kind. Dry your hands thoroughly. This can help cut down on contact dermatitis as well. Never apply oil-based creams, lotions, or soaps prior to donning gloves.

Consider reducing your exposure to latex. If you (1) are at high risk for developing latex allergy, (2) have multiple allergies, or (3) have had multiple surgeries, consider reducing your exposure to latex. You may wish to talk to your health care providers about using latex-safe equipment when receiving medical and dental care. Talk to your supervisor or safety officer about latex-safe products for use at work.

Finally, educate yourself in regard to latex allergy and notify your supervisor or safety officer of any concerns you may have regarding latex exposure at work.

References

Natural rubber latex is derived from the rubber tree **Hevea brasiliensis**. Natural rubber latex is combined with other chemicals to make more than 40,000 products. More than 400 of these latex-containing products are commonly used in medical supplies. Latex gloves, surgical masks, tourniquets, adhesive bandages, tapes, syringe plungers, blood pressure (sphygmomanometer) cuffs, and stethoscopes are examples of typical medical products that contain latex.¹

Since many of these products, particularly latex gloves, contain both latex and other chemicals, we must be aware that a person may have a reaction to either the chemicals or the latex. The proteins in latex can cause an allergic reaction, but the chemicals may cause an irritant reaction that can be mistaken for an allergic reaction.

Most health care workers are not aware of the many household items that contain latex. For example, latex may be found in balloons, dishwashing gloves, sponges for baby bottles, pacifiers, diapers and nappies, soles of shoes, condoms, tires, windshield wipers in clothing, automobile tires, bicycle handlebar grips, carpeting, and swimming goggles.²

An increasing number of comparable nonlatex items are being manufactured for both medical and household use. Various organizations, such as the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), provide lists of latex-safe products. You may visit the NIOSH Web site at www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.html. LabCorp has employed the use of several of these alternative products already. For instance, our adhesive bandages and vacutainers are latex-safe products.

Several products are made with synthetic latex and these products do not release the proteins that can cause an allergic reaction. For instance, latex house paint contains synthetic latex, so it would not cause a natural rubber latex reaction.

### How does Allergy Develop?

The protein in latex is a sensitizer. The amount of exposure needed to cause latex sensitization varies from individual to individual. Some individuals may never react, while others could develop symptoms after minimal exposure. Certain individuals are at higher risk for becoming sensitized.³

- Persons with atopy (a tendency to have multiple allergic conditions), particularly allergies to potato, banana, tomato, kiwi, papaya, avocado, and chestnut³
- Individuals who have had multiple surgeries
- Those who frequently use latex gloves or other latex-containing products.

Exposure occurs each time you come in contact with latex protein, whether blowing up a latex balloon, having a root canal, delivering a baby, or wearing gloves at work. Production materials contained in common disposable latex gloves contain bacterial proteases and endotoxins that can cause skin breakdown and may produce an irritant reaction. This reaction may be interpreted as an allergic reaction. Minimizing your exposure can help decrease your likelihood of sensitization.

Latex protein adheres to the powder in powdered gloves. When these gloves are pulled on and off, latex proteins are released into the air and can result in exposure to the mucous membranes and lungs. LabCorp has discontinued the use of powdered latex gloves to eliminate this source of exposure. LabCorp will phase out the use of all powdered disposable gloves.⁴

Washing your hands before putting on gloves is critical. This removes any dirt that may come between the glove and your hand and avoids the irritation and possible skin breakdown that may result in increased latex exposure. Hand washing before putting on gloves also removes creams or soaps, such as some shower gels that are oil-based. These oil-based products bind with the proteins in the latex gloves and increase exposure potential.¹

Likewise, it is also important to wash your hands after removing gloves to wash off any protein that may have adhered to your hands. Keep in mind that one of the most direct routes of exposure is through mucous membranes. If you remove your gloves and then pick up your sandwich without washing your hands, you probably will ingest some latex protein. If you remove your gloves and apply lotion prior to washing your hands, you may have tightly bound these proteins to your skin.

### Wash your hands before and after wearing gloves.

A person with latex sensitivity would not be allergic to latex house paint because it contains synthetic latex.

### Could you be Sensitized?

There are three types of skin reactions associated with latex⁴:

1. **Irritant contact dermatitis.** This condition is characterized by dry, itchy, irritated skin. Although it develops over time, it is not a true allergy. It can be caused by a variety of work-related practices and materials, such as repeated handwashing, inconsistent drying of hands; the use of cleaners and sanitizers, and some powders added to gloves.

2. **Chemical sensitivity dermatitis (delayed hypersensitivity).** This condition is characterized by poison ivy-like blisters that can appear 24 to 48 hours after contact. The reaction is not so much caused by latex as by the chemicals that may be used to process latex.

3. **Latex allergy (immediate hypersensitivity).** A true latex reaction, this condition is characterized by itchy eyes and scalp, scratchy throat, and respiratory involvement. Redness and hives may also result. Symptoms occur within minutes of exposure and, in rare cases, these reactions can be life-threatening.

You should suspect that you may be sensitized if you experience certain symptoms immediately after exposure to latex. These symptoms include:

- Skin redness
- Hives (urticaria)
- Runny nose (rhinitis)
- Itching at point of contact, eyes, or nose

### How is Latex Allergy Diagnosed?

A detailed medical history combined with testing is used to diagnose latex allergy. A physician may order latex sensitivity test or, since certain food allergies are associated with latex sensitivity, an allergy profile that checks for sensitivity to latex and certain foods as well.⁵

### Think it’s No Big Deal?

Of the 7.7 million healthcare workers in the U.S., it is estimated that 8-12% are latex sensitive. Persons with atopy have a 15% to 33% chance of developing sensitivity. Spina Bifida patients have a 60% chance of developing latex sensitivity.⁵