

Latex — An Occupational Hazard

Latex gloves were once seen as part of the solution to occupational disease but are now recognized as part of the problem.

National and international health and safety agencies recognize latex allergies as a significant hazard to a health care worker's health and career. The American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology called the situation "a major health problem of epidemic proportions "for health care workers.

It is estimated that more than 10% of Canada's health care workers are allergic to latex. The rate among nurses who work in hospitals is 17%. Allergies to latex tend to worsen with continued exposure. The sharp rise in latex allergies is a result of the increase in the use of gloves as part of universal precautions.

What products contain latex?

- Medical Gloves
- Mattresses on stretchers
- Dental devices
- Urinary catheters
- Stethoscope and blood pressure cuff tubing
- Feeding nipples and pacifiers
- Face masks
- Ambu bags
- PCA syringes
- Adhesive tape
- Bandages
- Sanitary and incontinence pads
- Wound drains
- Balloons
- Computer mouse pads
- Injection ports
- Condoms and diaphragms
- Electrode pads
- Rubber bands
- Rubber syringe stoppers
- Medication vial stoppers
- Bulb syringes
- Erasers

What are the symptoms?

- ▲ Irritant contact dermatitis (non-immune);
- ▲ Allergic contact dermatitis or type IV (delayed hypersensitivity); and immediate hypersensitivity, or type I.
- ▲ Hives
- ▲ Itchy red eyes, sneezing, runny or stuffed nose, itching of the nose or palate
- ▲ Shortness of breath, wheezing, chest tightness or difficulty breathing
- ▲ Anaphylaxis

Alternatives to Latex Gloves

There are 3 major synthetic "safe" alternatives to Natural Rubber Latex:

	Barrier Protection	Strength and Durability	Fit and Comfort
Latex	Long-standing barrier qualities	Strong, natural rubber is durable	Provides comfortable fit
Neoprene (Chloroprene)	Good but tear resistance is marginal	Strong	Provides good fit, has some elastic ability that enhances fit
Nitrile	Resistant to punctures and tears, flexes and does not develop holes	Strong, has puncture resistant qualities	Slightly tighter fit
Vinyl	Easily breaks during use, baggy	Weak, breaks easily and punctures easily in use	Fit limited — baggy
Polyurethane	Durable and high puncture resistance	Excellent tear, puncture and abrasion resistance	Good comfort and fit — has latex-like qualities

What can you do?

- ▲ Report any reactions to latex to your supervisor— fill out a WCB form if necessary
- ▲ Report the allergic reaction to you local UNA OH&S representative - fill out a UNA OH&S form.
- ▲ Insist that your employer provide non -latex gloves to all nurses
- ▲ Ensure that your employer has a plan in place to purchase latex-free medical equipment and supplies.



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United Nurses of Alberta