

Patient briefing



Information

26 May 2005

Understanding NPSA advice

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) helps the NHS to provide safe healthcare for everyone. This information is about the NPSA's advice for people who have an allergy associated with latex*. Although this information has been written for people who have this type of allergy, it may also be useful for their families and for patient groups.

Protecting people with allergy associated with latex

What is latex?

Latex is a type of rubber. It is made from tree sap and chemicals. Latex is used in medical equipment such as gloves, stethoscopes, dressings, bandages and in tubes used to put fluids into your body. It is a very tough rubber, even when it is stretched thinly.

About latex allergy

If you are allergic to the chemicals used when medical equipment is made out of latex, you may get a red scaly rash several hours after you come into contact with latex. Doctors call this contact dermatitis. Your skin may just be a bit itchy, or feel very sore and leathery. If you are allergic to latex itself, symptoms can start very quickly (within 30 minutes) and can be serious. Your skin may get raised, blotchy red patches. This is called hives. You may also get asthma, a runny nose and sore eyes. In rare cases, people have difficulty breathing and their blood pressure drops. This is called anaphylaxis and can be life-threatening.

Who gets a latex allergy?

Allergic reactions may not happen the first time you come into contact with latex. Although anyone can get an allergy, it is more common in people who come into contact with latex a lot. For example, you are more likely to become allergic to latex if you have lots of operations.

Protecting people

The NPSA has given advice to help the NHS make sure people do not come into contact with latex if they have an allergy associated with it. Your hospital or surgery may be doing these things already.

- Everyone in your healthcare team should know about latex allergy.
- A member of your healthcare team should ask if you have any allergies before you have any tests or treatment.
- If you have an allergy associated with latex, your healthcare team should always use latex-free equipment and products.

In general, healthcare professionals are expected to follow advice from the NPSA.

*We use the terms allergy associated with latex, latex allergy and latex sensitisation to include both allergic reactions caused by residues of chemicals used in the manufacture of latex products and allergic reactions caused by the proteins in natural rubber latex itself.



The NPSA is also encouraging companies that make medical equipment to put clear signs on products with latex in them. This will make it easier for healthcare professionals to make sure they are using latex-free equipment.

If you do not think you are allergic to latex, it is sometimes safer if your healthcare team uses latex rather than latex-free products. For example, latex gloves are thinner and stronger than non-latex gloves and will stop infections passing between you and your doctor or nurse.

How you can help

If you know you are allergic to latex, you should tell all the healthcare staff that care for you, including doctors, dentists, ambulance staff and nurses. You should also tell them about the sort of reactions you have had. They can then make sure that you do not come into contact with latex during your treatment.

More information

If you need more information about latex allergy, please ask a member of your healthcare team.

The following organisations can also give you more information:

The Latex Allergy Support Group

www.lasg.co.uk

Helpline: 07071 225838 - available between 7pm and 10pm

The Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk/latex/pdf/patientinfosheet.pdf

A patient safety information notice is available in full from the NPSA website at www.npsa.nhs.uk/advice

For more information on the NPSA, visit www.npsa.nhs.uk