Healthcare – Working with a Latex Allergy

What’s at Stake?

Since it was recognized in the late 1970s, allergies to latex have become a major health concern.

Latex is used in a variety of applications and products, which leads to an increasing number of people in the workplace being affected.

Healthcare workers exposed to latex gloves or other latex medical products are especially at risk. It is estimated that 8-12% of healthcare workers are latex sensitive.

What’s the Danger?

A latex allergy can cause skin rashes; contact dermatitis; nasal, eye, or sinus irritation; hives; shortness of breath; coughing; wheezing; or unexplained shock. None of which are good during the workday.

Latex can be found in many places such as:

- Gloves
- Urinary catheters
- Oxygen masks; and
- Pressure Relieving Cushions

How to Protect Yourself

3 easy ways to keep yourself safe

1. Tell people

- It is essential that you let your employer and co-workers know you are allergic to latex.

- Your employer has a legal obligation to provide alternative products.
- Wear a medic alert bracelet if you experience a severe reaction.

2. Avoid contact

- Know which products in your environment have or may have latex in them.
- Read packaging for unknown products.
- Do not wear gloves unnecessarily or for longer than you need to.
- If you do use latex products:
    - Avoid applying oily hand cream – the chemical reaction with the latex increases the risk/severity of the reaction.
    - Wash hands with warm soapy water as soon as possible after removing them.
    - Do not shake gloves before or after applying. Latex dust is often the cause of the allergy.

3. Know the symptoms

- Symptoms generally begin within minutes after exposure to latex containing products.
    - Hives, itching, stuffy or runny nose.
    - Asthma symptoms of wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing.
    - Itching, redness and swelling of skin that touched the item containing latex.
    - Eczema and blisters on the back of the hands.
    - Anaphylaxis – rare but it does happen.
- When you know the symptoms, you can seek medical advice, but don’t ignore them – they can quickly escalate to a severe reaction.
- Be sure to take any medications as prescribed to help you manage the allergy.
- Carry an EpiPen if directed and prescribed by your doctor.

Final Word

Latex is a commonly used product in many aspects of life. Its high level of use has led to a significant increase in the number of people displaying signs of an allergy to it. Many healthcare settings now use only non-latex gloves, but other products may contain latex, so avoiding it can be challenging.