

Latex Glove Allergies and the Food Industry



What is Latex Allergy?

Latex allergy is the term used to describe a reaction that occurs in some sensitive individuals after being exposed to proteins found in natural rubber latex (NRL). NRL can be found in over 40,000 products used in everyday life, such as latex gloves, bandages and balloons. Symptoms of latex allergy may range from mild to severe. Mild reactions may include skin rashes and hives, and nasal, eye or sinus symptoms. More severe reactions may include trouble breathing and anaphylactic shock.

Who is at Risk?

Between 1 and 6 percent of the general population is sensitized to latex, whereas only 0.6 to 1.3 percent of people are allergic to peanuts, one of the most common food allergens. Individuals who are frequently exposed to latex are at greatest risk of developing latex sensitivity and allergy. Certain individuals with pre-existing conditions such as spina bifida may also be at an increased risk.

What about Consumers with Severe Latex Allergies?

If a consumer reports a latex allergy, food should be prepared using non-latex gloves. Latex sensitive consumers have been reported to have had allergic reactions after consuming foods contacted by latex gloves. Latex proteins may be transferred from latex gloves to foods during preparation, and proteins from latex gloves can be released when gloves are put on or removed. Individuals who have a latex allergy may also experience allergic reactions when consuming certain foods such as bananas, avocados, celery, chestnuts, tomatoes, and pears.

Recommendations for Use of Latex Gloves in the Workplace:

1. The National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOSH) recommends that food workers use non-latex gloves. A wide variety of alternatives exist including polyvinylchloride, neoprene, styrene or synthetic.
2. If latex gloves are used, employees should be provided with powder-free, reduced protein gloves. Powdered gloves pose a greater risk than non-powdered gloves. This is because latex proteins bond to the powder, causing more latex to reach the skin. In addition, particles may become airborne when gloves are donned by employees. The powder may be inhaled by an allergic individual, possibly causing an adverse reaction.
3. If employees are wearing latex gloves, they should not use oil-based hand creams or lotions, since these products can cause glove deterioration that exacerbates the allergy.
4. Employers should encourage employees to wash hands with a mild soap and dry thoroughly after removing latex gloves. This ensures removal of any proteins from the employees' hands, reducing the potential for long term exposure and allergic reaction.
5. If latex allergy is suspected, avoid contact with latex and seek medical advice.

Resources:

1. NIOSH Alert: Preventing Allergic Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace. June 1997
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/97-135/>
2. US HHS NIOSH Latex Allergy: A Prevention Guide <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/98-113/>
3. Allergy and Asthma Foundation of America. (2015, October). Latex Allergy. Retrieved April 4, 2018, from <http://www.aafa.org/page/latex-allergy.aspx>
4. Deval R, Ramesh V, Prasad G, Jain AK. Natural rubber latex allergy. *Indian J Dermatol Venereol Leprol* 2008;74:304-10
5. 2017 FDA Food Code, Pg 427-429 § Annex 3 (2017)
6. United States Department of Labor (2008, January 28). Potential for Sensitization and Possible Allergic Reaction to Natural Rubber Latex Gloves and other Natural Rubber Products. Retrieved from <https://www.osha.gov/dts/shib/shib012808.pdf>
7. American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (2014). Latex Allergy. Retrieved from <https://acaai.org/allergies/types/skin-allergies/latex-allergy>
8. American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology (2018). Latex Allergy. Retrieved from <http://www.aaaai.org/conditions-and-treatments/allergies/Latex-Allergy>
9. Food Allergy Research & Education (2018). Peanut Allergy. Retrieved from <https://www.foodallergy.org/common-allergens/peanut>