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WELFARE OF ANAESTHETISTS SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

LATEX ALLERGY

An Occupational Hazard for Anaesthetists

INTRODUCTION

Natural rubber latex is the milky sap from the rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*.

The protein portion is responsible for the type I hypersensitivity: urticaria which can lead to anaphylaxis.

Chemicals give latex its elasticity, and these cause the type 4 (cell mediated) contact dermatitis.

ASSOCIATED RISK FACTORS FOR LATEX ALLERGY

- Atopy
- Exposure to Latex
 - Latex gloves are preferred for strength and exclusion of viral particles. Some synthetic gloves, eg vinyl, are not as strong or impermeable, and should not be used as protection for blood and body fluids.
- Associated food allergies:
 - Banana, avocado, chestnut, kiwi fruit, tomatoes, potatoes, stone fruits.
 - Reactions to foods may precede recognition of latex allergy and also the reverse.

WHY ARE POWDERED LATEX GLOVES A PROBLEM?

Latex Aeroallergens

Latex allergens are absorbed onto the cornstarch powder, and then become a source of airborne latex allergen, known as latex aeroallergens.

Latex aeroallergen sensitises individuals working in this environment more effectively than wearing latex gloves.

ANAESTHETISTS WITH LATEX ALLERGY

- Seek good quality occupational advice in view of the high risk work environment.
- There is no treatment available at present apart from latex avoidance, which must include avoiding the inhalation of powder from latex gloves.



- The best hope for continued anaesthetic practice is to seek early diagnosis.
- The severity of the reaction to latex must be determined.
 - Those with severe symptoms may not be able to work in acute health care environment
 - If symptoms are not severe, anaesthetists may be able to work in the clinical area.
- Areas where powdered gloves are used should be avoided.
- Neoprene/nitrile gloves should be used where there is a risk of blood contamination.
- Non-powdered latex or synthetic gloves should be worn by other staff in the area.
- Outside the work environment care also needs to be taken, particularly avoiding latex balloons and latex condoms!
- Be prepared if you become a patient !!

GUIDELINES FOR REDUCTION OF SENSITISATION TO LATEX

- Ongoing education regarding latex sensitivity and the safe use of gloves.
- Identification and advice to individuals with rashes or atopic conditions.
- Accurate diagnosis of reactions to latex gloves. It is important to see an allergist who has knowledge of this condition.
- Provision of appropriate gloves, ie powder-less low allergen latex gloves.

Thanks to Dr Helen Kolowale for this document

Further reading

Crippa M et al. Prevention of Latex allergy among health care workers: evaluation of the extractable latex protein content in different types of medical gloves. *Am J Ind Med* 2003; 44:24-31.

Latex allergy. A position paper of the British Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology. *Clin Exp Allergy* 2003; 33:1484-1499.

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