Close your eyes. Now, picture a product in your facility that contains latex. What are you picturing? Chances are, you’ve conjured up an image of gloves. While latex and gloves seem to go hand in hand – pun intended – latex can also lurk in some unexpected places and be a serious problem for people with latex allergies.

What’s the problem with latex, anyhow?

Natural rubber latex is manufactured using a milky fluid that comes from the rubber tree. When people have latex allergies, their immune systems mistakenly think that proteins found in natural rubber latex are harmful substances. This can lead to allergic reactions ranging from sneezing and skin rashes to anaphylaxis.¹

Latex sensitivity can be caused by either direct contact with latex or inhalation of latex particles. Products that are made of latex can shed latex particles, which then become airborne. This is especially common with latex gloves.¹ Even powder-free latex gloves can contain a small amount of residual powder that is released into the air when gloves are pulled on and off.
It is estimated that between 1 and 6 percent of the general population is sensitized to latex. Roughly 8 to 12 percent of healthcare workers have a latex sensitivity, partly because of frequent exposure to latex.

The costs related to latex allergy are staggering. It can cost between $5,000 and $25,000 to treat just one anaphylactic episode resulting from a latex allergy. On average, the overall cost to treat latex allergy is estimated at $218,000 per employee. There is no “cure” for latex allergy.

Other latex-containing products

While gloves have become the poster child for latex in long-term care, many other products around your facility could also contain latex, including:

- Blood pressure cuffs
- Stethoscopes
- IV tubing
- Syringes
- Respirators
- Electrode pads
- Masks

Tips for reducing latex allergy

The first step is to identify all residents and staff who have latex allergies. Start reducing latex allergy in your facility by swapping latex-containing products for products that are latex-free. Gloves are a great place to start. Nitrile is similar to natural rubber latex when it comes to fit, feel, durability and dexterity, but nitrile gloves have been found to fail significantly less often than latex gloves. Since nitrile gloves are made of a synthetic polymer, they don’t contain any natural rubber latex and can therefore be used by workers with latex allergies.

You also might want to consider banning latex balloons from your facility. Just like gloves, latex balloons can release latex particles into the air. If you choose to ban latex balloons, make sure you communicate this policy to residents and families upon admission and to your staff, local florists and volunteers as well.

Your kitchen staff should refrain from touching food while wearing latex gloves. Latex proteins from gloves can easily transfer and adhere to foods. When affected food is consumed, latex proteins are absorbed by the body, which can cause sensitization or allergic reactions. If your facility uses an outside food service, make sure that your contract specifies that no latex gloves are to be used when handling food. A NIOSH Alert released in 1997 specifies that latex gloves shouldn’t be used in foodservice.

Additionally, you don’t want to serve cross-reactive foods to residents who are sensitive to latex. There are a number of foods that contain proteins that are similar to latex, including bananas (which are quite popular in nursing homes), avocados, chestnuts and kiwi. Your dietary staff should locate a list of cross-reactive foods and avoid serving the most highly cross-reactive items to residents who have a latex allergy.

Finally, since so many products used in your facility might contain latex, why not arrange a conversation with your distributor rep to discuss your goal of going latex-free? Your rep should be able to offer you latex-free alternatives to commonly used products.

References


