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## Latex Allergy Information

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Students who are in the Health Science Program could come in contact with items containing latex during classroom instruction or hospital rotations. Due to the risk associated with coming in contact with latex products, it is imperative to notify the instructor of any allergy or potential of an allergy to latex products.

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### Who Is at Risk?

A wide variety of products contain latex: medical supplies, personal protective equipment, and numerous household objects. Most people who encounter latex products only through their general use in society have no health problems from the use of these products. Workers with ongoing latex exposure are at risk for developing latex allergy. Such workers include health care workers (physicians, nurses, aides, dentists, dental hygienists, operating room employees, laboratory technicians, and hospital housekeeping personnel) who frequently use latex gloves and other latex-containing medical supplies.

### Types of Reactions to Latex:

#### 1. Irritant Contact Dermatitis

The most common reaction to latex products is irritant contact dermatitis—the development of dry, itchy, irritated areas on the skin, usually the hands. This reaction is caused by skin irritation from using gloves and possibly by exposure to other workplace products and chemicals. The reaction can also result from repeated hand washing and drying, incomplete hand drying, use of cleaners and sanitizers, and exposure to powders added to the gloves. Irritant contact dermatitis is not a true allergy.

#### 2. Chemical Sensitivity Dermatitis

Allergic contact dermatitis (delayed hypersensitivity, also sometimes called chemical sensitivity dermatitis) results from exposure to chemicals added to latex during harvesting, processing, or manufacturing. These chemicals can cause skin reactions similar to those caused by poison ivy. As with poison ivy, the rash usually begins 24 to 48 hours after contact and may progress to oozing skin blisters or spread away from the area of skin touched by the latex.

#### 3. Latex Allergy

Latex allergy (*immediate hypersensitivity*) can be a more serious reaction to latex than irritant contact dermatitis or allergic contact dermatitis. Certain proteins in latex may cause sensitization (positive blood or skin test, with or without symptoms). Although the amount of exposure needed to cause sensitization or symptoms is not known, exposures at even very low levels can trigger allergic reactions in some sensitized individuals.

Reactions usually begin within minutes of exposure to latex, but they can occur hours later and can produce various symptoms. Mild reactions to latex involve skin redness, hives, or itching. More severe reactions may involve respiratory symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, and asthma (difficult breathing, coughing spells, and wheezing). Rarely, shock may occur; but a life-threatening reaction is seldom the first sign of latex allergy. Such reactions are similar to those seen in some allergic persons after a bee sting.