It was not until the late 1970s that allergy to latex was discovered. Latex allergy then became a prime health concern as healthcare workers started to get affected by it. It is estimated that almost 8-12% of healthcare workers in the United States are latex sensitive. Exposure to latex in their work field mainly is in the form of latex gloves, dental dams and tubing.

In the United States of America, powdered latex gloves were used until 2017. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the use of powdered latex gloves soon after, because the natural rubber latex protein could become airborne when combined with the glove powder which could then be inhaled and result in an allergic response.

Natural rubber latex comes from the sap of rubber trees which contains various proteins that can cause allergic responses in some individuals. Synthetic latex materials are made up of nitrile or vinyl which do not cause any allergic response. Allergic responses to natural rubber latex can be as severe as anaphylaxis, which can even cause death.

It was also found that people who were allergic to pollen, molds and certain food items i.e. apples, bananas, avocados and tomatoes were at an increased risk of developing allergies to latex. Likewise, people who were allergic to latex also developed allergic responses to the above mentioned foods.

Latex allergies present themselves in various forms. Skin reactions like itching, redness, rash or hives are commonly found along with itchy nose, throat or eyes. Such mild reactions could more often be accompanied by sneezing, coughing or wheezing. Severe reactions to latex include nausea, abdominal cramps and difficulty in breathing.

Most allergic reactions to latex occur almost immediately, however some skin reactions may develop after 1 or 2 days. The most severe form of reaction is anaphylaxis which is mostly caused by mucosal exposure of latex. Low blood pressure and difficulty in breathing owing to swelling of nose, throat and tongue are pathognomonic signs of anaphylaxis! Latex allergies can become fatal if not noted.

Therefore, dentists are advised to ask their patients about latex allergies during history taking in order to take the right precautions so as to avoid any such reactions while treating their patients.

References:

Written by: Amna Fakhar (Pakistan)  
Proofread by: Walaa Absi (Palestine)