
Natural Rubber Latex Allergy and Spina Bifida

March 2026

People with Spina Bifida are at high risk for latex allergy. From birth, they should avoid natural latex products. Safer options include silicone, plastic, nitrile, or vinyl instead.

The history of latex allergy and Spina Bifida

Doctors first noticed a strong link between latex allergy and children with Spina Bifida in the late 1980s. At that time, hospitals used latex gloves and rubber products without much regulation. Some children had very serious, even life-threatening reactions during surgery. Later, doctors discovered latex was the main trigger, especially for children with bladder problems related to Spina Bifida.

By the early 1990s, hospitals began protecting babies and children by removing latex gloves, red rubber catheters, and other rubber products. These changes started in newborn nurseries, intensive care units, and children's hospitals, and soon spread to emergency rooms and pediatric offices.

Even today, latex can still be found in many places—hospitals, clinics, schools, homes, and community spaces. That means children and adults with Spina Bifida may still face risks of exposure, so awareness and prevention remain very important.

What is latex allergy?

A latex allergy means someone's body reacts to proteins found in natural rubber latex. Anyone can develop this allergy, but it often happens after being around latex products many times over a long period.

Doctors don't know exactly how much exposure it takes to cause an allergy. Softer rubber items, like gloves and balloons, are more likely to trigger reactions because of the way they're made. The more often a person is exposed to latex, the higher the risk of becoming sensitive to it.

Latex can enter the body in different ways:

- **Touching the skin** (like with gloves or catheters)
- **Breathing in latex powder** (from balloons or gloves)
- **Through medical procedures** (when latex touches the mouth, eyes, bladder, or other sensitive areas)

Severe reactions can happen if latex gets into the bloodstream. That's why it's important to know where latex might be present and to avoid it when possible.

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Who should avoid contact with latex protein?

Children and adults with Spina Bifida who use catheters or have had many surgeries early in life (like bladder surgery or shunt revisions) are at higher risk for developing a latex allergy. This happens because of repeated exposure over time.

Latex reactions can start with mild symptoms, but sometimes they become life-threatening without warning. Many people don't realize they are sensitive to latex because the signs can be vague, like rashes or breathing problems. That puts them at risk for a serious reaction.

If someone has had a severe reaction to latex, they should:

- Wear a medic-alert bracelet or necklace
- Carry auto-injectable epinephrine (like an EpiPen)
- Keep sterile non-latex gloves and other non-latex medical supplies for emergencies

It's also important to talk about latex allergy and prevention with doctors, nurses, schools, daycare staff, camps, and anyone else who helps care for the person with Spina Bifida.

Where is latex protein found?

Latex can be found in many everyday items—including products used for personal care, medical and dental visits, and even in community spaces. Some foods have proteins similar to latex that may cause reactions, and certain powders (like those from gloves or balloons) can also contain latex and be breathed in.

Latex in products and foods

Latex is used in thousands of medical and household items because it's durable and inexpensive. While most medical products are labeled, everyday items like gloves, balloons, or sports gear may not be. If you're unsure, it's best to check with the manufacturer.

Some foods—like certain fruits, nuts, and vegetables—have proteins similar to latex. This can cause reactions in people with latex allergy, sometimes called “latex-food syndrome.” Not everyone with latex allergy reacts to these foods, so families should only avoid them if a reaction has happened and a doctor or dietitian advises it.

Foods with a high degree of latex allergy association or prevalence: Avocado, banana, chestnut, kiwi.

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Foods with a moderate degree of latex allergy association or prevalence: Apple, carrot, celery, melons, papaya, potatoes, tomatoes.

Foods with low or undetermined latex allergy association: Apricot, buckwheat, castor bean, cayenne pepper, cherries, chickpeas, citrus fruits, coconut, dill, fig, grape, hazelnut, lychee, mango, nectarine, oregano, passion fruit, peach, peanut, pear, persimmon, pineapple, plum, rye, sage, shellfish, soybean, strawberry, sunflower seed, sweet pepper, walnut, wheat, zucchini.

What are symptoms of latex allergy?

Even mild latex allergy symptoms can quickly become serious if a person is exposed to latex again. Some symptoms include:

- Itching
- Localized skin redness, hives or rash
- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Itchy, watery eyes
- Scratchy throat
- Flushed cheeks

Other reactions to latex include:

- Hives that spread all over the body
- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Redness and swelling around the eyes
- Nausea and vomiting

The most serious allergic reaction to latex is anaphylaxis, a type of shock.

An anaphylactic response to latex is a medical emergency. Signs and symptoms include:

- Trouble breathing because the lips, tongue, or throat are swollen
- Severe wheezing
- Severe drop in blood pressure
- Dizziness
- Loss of consciousness
- Confusion
- Slurred speech
- Rapid or weak pulse
- Skin looks bluish, especially on the lips and fingernails.
- Diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting

If these symptoms appear and you're not sure how serious they are, call your doctor right away or dial 911.

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Additional resources

- Allergy and Asthma Network - [Complete Guide to Latex Allergy](https://allergyasthmanetwork.org/allergies/latex-allergy/)
<https://allergyasthmanetwork.org/allergies/latex-allergy/>
- American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. - [Latex Allergy](https://www.aaaai.org/tools-for-the-public/conditions-library/allergies/latex-allergy)
<https://www.aaaai.org/tools-for-the-public/conditions-library/allergies/latex-allergy>
- American Latex Allergy Association
 - [Latex Allergy...It's More Than Just The Gloves!](https://latexallergyresources.org/) <https://latexallergyresources.org/>
 - Cross Reactive Food <http://latexallergyresources.org/cross-reactive-food>
- Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America - [Latex Allergy](https://aafa.org/allergies/types-of-allergies/latex-allergy/)
<https://aafa.org/allergies/types-of-allergies/latex-allergy/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/) <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/>
 - [Preventing Allergic Reactions to Natural Rubber Latex in the Workplace](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/97-135/) (also available in Spanish) <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/97-135/>
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration
 - [Latex Allergy](https://www.osha.gov/latex-allergy) (also available in Spanish) <https://www.osha.gov/latex-allergy>
- Spina Bifida Association - [Latex and Latex Allergy in Spina Bifida](#), Guidelines for the Care of People with Spina Bifida

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This information does not constitute medical advice for any individual. As specific cases may vary from the general information presented here, SBA advises readers to consult a qualified medical or other professional on an individual basis.