University of ULSTER

School of Nursing

GUIDELINES ON THE PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF LATEX SENSITISATION/ALLERGY

The aim of this guidance is to provide information for staff and students on the procedure that should be followed if a student or a member of staff appears to have sensitivity or an allergic reaction associated with working with latex within the practical skills suites/rooms in the School of Nursing.

1. WHAT IS NATURAL RUBBER LATEX?

Natural rubber latex (NRL) is composed of natural proteins and added chemicals resulting in a durable flexible material often used in the manufacture of protective gloves and is an integral part of thousands of everyday consumer and healthcare items. As with many other natural products, NRL is recognised as a substance hazardous to health, as defined by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations (NI) 2002. The School of Nursing recognises its duty to prevent exposure altogether if this is reasonably practicable. If not prevented COSHH Risk Assessments are carried out to identify suitable control measures and to provide specific information on latex allergy to all relevant staff and students

2. HOW CAN LATEX HARM YOUR HEALTH?

Once sensitisation to latex has taken place, further exposure to the substance, even to the tiniest trace, will cause the symptoms to recur. Latex exposure can lead to a number of health problems, including the following:

2.1 Irritation

Symptoms include redness, soreness, dryness or cracking of the skin in areas exposed to latex. This type of reaction is not an allergic reaction (see 2 & 3 below). Once the irritant agent, eg latex, has been identified and contact with it ceases, the symptoms will disappear and not recur.

2.2 Type I Allergic Reaction

Symptoms include:

- Localised or generalised rash (urticaria or hives);
- Inflammation of the mucous membranes in the nose (rhinitis);
- Red and swollen eyes with discharge (conjunctivitis); and
- Asthma-like symptoms. This is an allergic response to the latex proteins and occurs almost immediately on contact. In rare cases it may result in a very severe reaction known as anaphylactic shock (HSE 2012).

2.3 Type IV Allergic Reaction

Symptoms include dermatitis and itching with blisters, which are usually localised to the hands and arms. These occur between 10-24 hours after exposure and can get worse over the next 72 hours. This is usually an allergic response to the chemical additives, known as accelerators, used in the manufacturing process.

3. WHERE IS LATEX USED IN HEALTHCARE?

As well as being used for gloves, latex is found in a variety of products and medical devices eg airways, catheters, dressing and bandages, intravenous tubing, and stethoscopes.

4. WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY IN REDUCING THE RISK OF LATEX SENSITISATION/ ALLERGY?

4.1 Prior to Undertaking Skills:

Staff and students should disclose a known sensitivity or allergy to latex on commencement of employment or on admission to a course to Occupational Health within the University or as soon as they are aware that they may have a sensitivity or allergy.

4.2 Avoidance of Latex Allergy:

The best way of avoiding latex allergy is not to use latex products. You should use non-latex gloves etc routinely and latex only when it is specifically required. Students and staff should follow the guidance provided by the HSE (2012) – see http://www.hse.gov.uk/healthservices/latex/

4.3 Reporting Signs of Sensitivity or Allergy:

If you develop any particular skin or breathing problems made worse by the use of latex products within the practical skills suites in the School of Nursing you should report immediately to a member of teaching staff and seek advice from Occupational Health. Further investigations can then be carried out, a diagnosis can be made and appropriate management arranged. An incident form should be completed (by the member of staff who is coordinating the skills session) as soon as possible after the event and sent to University of Ulster Health and Safety Services

4.4 Students Undertaking Practice Learning Experiences:

Students should adhere to practice learning policies/guidelines in relation to the prevention and management of latex sensitisation. Those who develop signs that may be consistent with sensitivity or allergy to latex whilst undertaking practice learning experiences should report their concerns immediately to the line manager and Occupational Health. Students may be referred to the local Occupational Health Department. Further investigations can then be carried out, a diagnosis can be made and appropriate management arranged. A local incident form should be completed as soon as possible after the event.

Reference

Health and Safety Executive. 2012. *Latex allergies in health and social care.* http://www.hse.gov.uk/healthservices/latex/

Useful Web Links

Health & Safety Executive - http://www.hse.gov.uk/latex/index.htm
Latex Allergy Support Group - http://www.lasg.co.uk
Royal College of Nursing - http://www.rcn.org.uk