American Latex Allergy Association

Web Article: "Creating a Safe School for Latex-Sensitive Children"

Latex avoidance has become the accepted standard of care for children with spina bifida, a back deformity caused by the spine?s failure to close during gestation. However, safeguarding children in school from exposure to products made of natural rubber latex (NRL) can be a challenge. Found in everything from classroom and janitorial supplies to gymnasium equipment, NRL can be lethal to latex-sensitive children such as those with spina bifida, cerebral palsy, asthma, eczema or food allergies.

Parents, teachers and school administrators can minimize exposure to NRL by developing a school safety plan. The information below outlines the steps needed to create a latex-safe school.

- **Educate School Staff About Latex Allergies**
  Before the start of the school year, parents should provide staff members with information about the link between spina bifida and latex allergies. Published medical and healthcare journal articles, letters from a student?s attending physician and latex lists from the Spina Bifida Association of America (SBAA) underscore the importance of limiting latex exposure. A school nurse, teacher or counselor also can help to communicate the message of latex avoidance to others on staff.

- **Identify Areas of Latex Exposure>**
  Latex can be found in classroom supplies, such as erasers, rubber bands and science lab equipment, and in gymnasium equipment, such as rubber mats, flooring, balls and racquet handles. Rubber gloves used by janitors to clean hallways, classrooms or school bathrooms can leave a residue on surfaces or release NRL proteins into the air. School bus tires also can release high levels of airborne NRL particles especially during heavy traffic.

  To combat NRL exposure, school personnel need to know the risks that latex poses to sensitized students and take the appropriate precautions. Cafeteria workers should replace latex gloves, which can contaminate food and spread NRL allergies to others, with good hygiene such as hand washing. School nurses should know that wearing powdered latex gloves to treat non-allergic students can release NRL proteins into the air and cause respiratory distress in latex-sensitive students.

- **Develop an Emergency Plan**
  An emergency plan plays an important role in any school safety program. It can help save the life of a latex-sensitive student by enabling school personnel to recognize and treat NRL reactions and determine the proper time to call for help. School personnel should keep latex-free first aid supplies on hand and advise ambulance and emergency room staff of a student?s NRL allergy.

- **Advocate Social Change**
  Rubber balloons, which festoon graduation parties, homecoming dances and senior proms, pose a serious health threat to latex-sensitive students and can sideline them from many school activities. Thoughtful planning and minor adjustments, such as substituting mylar for latex balloons, allow students with spina bifida, cerebral palsy or other conditions predisposed to NRL allergies to attend these school celebrations. Making school events safe for all students helps to integrate latex-sensitive students into the student body at large and promotes greater understanding and peer acceptance of sensitized students by non-sensitized students.

The above information is based on an article by Elli Meeropol which appeared in the Sept./Oct. 1998 issue of Insights into Spina Bifida.

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Reprinted from

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P.O. Box 198
Slinger, WI 53086
Phone: 262-677-9707 1-888-97-ALERT
Website: www.latexallergyresources.org

Source URL: http://latexallergyresources.org/articles/web-article-creating-safe-school-latex-sensitive-children