

## Hospital aims to be latex free

October 1, 2006

**Hospital aims to be latex free**  
**Allergies lead medical center to create unit**  
**By DEBBIE GILBERT**  
The Times

Latex, a substance found in many medical products, can cause life-threatening allergic reactions in some people. So hospitals are taking steps to eliminate the problem.

Northeast Georgia Medical Center's 1 West wing has been declared a "latex-safe" unit. Items that are typically made with latex, the natural rubber made from trees, have been replaced with non-latex substitutes.

"We started thinking about doing this in the spring of 2003, and we implemented it later that year," said Audrey Garrett, unit manager on 1 West, which houses orthopedic and neurology patients.

"We had some employees who were coming to me with skin rashes, so I ordered latex-free gloves. Then one employee had a reaction so severe that she had to carry an Epi-Pen (to reverse anaphylactic reactions) and had to be removed from clinical duty."

Symptoms of latex allergy can range from itchy eyes, coughing and rash to shock and respiratory distress.

The incidence of latex allergies has been on the rise. In response to the AIDS epidemic, hospitals have universal precautions that require all patient-care employees to wear gloves.

Latex is also found in a variety of medical and dental supplies, including bandages, tourniquets and urinary catheters.

The more you're exposed to latex, the more likely you are to become sensitized to it. This puts health care workers at especially high risk.

Having a latex-safe hospital ward provides an environment where allergic employees can continue to work, rather than having to retire from their profession.

It also makes it easier to care for patients who have latex allergies.

"Every patient admitted to the hospital is assessed for latex sensitivity," Garrett said. "We have them fill out a

form that asks very specific questions.?

Sensitive patients may be placed in the latex-safe unit, or a latex-safe room can be created anywhere in the hospital.

Garrett said they don't refer to the rooms as 'latex-free' because there are still a few items they haven't found non-latex substitutes for.

But solid, hard-rubber items are relatively benign. By far the worst threat, for sensitive people, is the gloves. That's especially true for medical gloves that are powdered, because when employees remove their gloves, particles of latex-carrying powder fly into the air.

'We took a big step, a long time ago, by going to powderless latex gloves,' said Cindy Taube, worker's compensation manager for the hospital.

Last week, administrators decided to eliminate latex gloves altogether, throughout Northeast Georgia Health System. All nursing units will transition to non-latex gloves as existing stocks are used up and new ones are ordered.

'We were surprised that the vinyl gloves actually cost less,' said Garrett.

Later, supply managers will work on replacing other types of latex items. Eventually, there will no longer be a need for a special latex-safe unit.

'Ultimately, the goal would be to have the entire hospital latex-free,' said Taube.

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Originally published Saturday, September 23, 2006

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*Reprinted from*

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