U.S. Food and Drug Administration reports allergic reactions to latex

The following information, based on a U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) alert, was reported in the June 1991 issue of the AANA NewsBulletin:

Severe allergic reactions to medical devices containing latex (natural rubber) have been reported by the FDA. Health care professionals have been advised by the FDA to identify their latex-sensitive patients and be prepared to treat allergic reactions promptly. Patient reactions to latex have ranged from contact urticaria to systemic anaphylaxis. Latex is a component of many medical devices, including surgical and examination gloves, catheters, intubation tubes, anesthesia masks, and dental dams.

FDA's recommendations to health professionals in regard to this problem are:

■ When taking general histories of all patients, include questions about latex sensitivity. For surgical and radiology patients, spina bifida patients, and health care workers, this recommendation is especially important. Questions about itching, rash or wheezing after wearing latex gloves or inflating a toy balloon may be useful. Patients with positive histories should have their charts flagged.

■ If latex sensitivity is suspected, consider using devices made with alternative materials, such as plastic. For example, a CRNA could wear a nonlatex glove over the latex glove if the patient is sensitive. If both the health professional and patient are sensitive, a latex middle glove could be used. (Latex gloves labeled "hypoallergenic" may not always prevent adverse reactions.)

■ Whenever latex-containing medical devices are used, especially when the latex comes in contact with mucous membranes, be alert to the possibility of an allergic reaction.

■ If an allergic reaction does occur and latex is suspected, advise the patient of a possible latex sensitivity and consider an immunologic evaluation.

■ Advise patients to tell health professionals and emergency personnel about any known latex sensitivity before undergoing medical procedures. Consider advising patients with severe latex sensitivity to wear a medical identification bracelet.

Repeated exposure to latex, both in medical devices and in other consumer products, may be part of the reason that the prevalence of latex sensitivity appears to be increasing. It has been reported that 6% to 7% of surgical personnel and 18% to 40% of spina bifida patients are latex-sensitive. Several patients died as a result of anaphylactoid reactions during barium enema procedures—the enema tips were latex cuffed.

FDA is asking CRNAs to report incidents of adverse reactions to latex or other materials used in medical devices. To report an incident, call the FDA Problem Reporting Program, operated through the U.S. Pharmacopeia toll-free number (800) 638-6725 (in Maryland call collect (301) 881-0256). For further information on the clinical aspects of latex sensitivity, call Claudia Gaffey, MD, FDA Office of Health Affairs, Center for Devices and Radiological Health, at (301) 427-1060.
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