American Latex Allergy Association

Handle with Care

Latex glove allergy problems on the rise.
By Ben Van Houten
Restaurant Business
August 1, 2000

WHILE THE BATTLE against foodborne illnesses continues to rage harder than ever, a disheartening trend is threatening to put a damper on the diligent food-safety efforts of operators across the country: a growing number of employees are having problems with latex allergies, hardly good news for an industry where latex gloves are one of the most common forms of protection against bacteria.

?This is definitely becoming a big-time problem,? says Steve Grover, VP-technical services for the National Restaurant Association. ?It?s a bad allergy to have, and it?s caused death before. And there?s no doubt from the number of calls we?ve been getting that this is becoming a major problem for restaurateurs, especially as glove usage continues to rise.?

Grover says problems began last year, when the Food and Drug Administration?s new Model Food Code recommended that foodservice workers not touch foods with bare hands, instead relying on gloves and tongs, among other methods. ?As a result of that, a lot of operators simply started requiring employees to wear latex gloves,? he says. ?Because latex is tougher and more durable than any other kind of glove, it was a natural move for a lot of operators.? In fact, states such as Minnesota and New York now require glove use in restaurants, though not specifically latex.

Latex allergies occur when a person?s skin is exposed to proteins found in natural rubber latex, leading to a simple hand rash which could be a precursor to a much more serious allergic response. ?If someone has a severe allergy, they?re going to know it,? says Grover. ?This is why we want to get the word out to operators, and let them know their options.?

Grower says the NRA is recommending alternative gloves, such as vinyl or synthetic-latex gloves. ?It?s easy for operators to switch to another type,? he says. ?Also, if they use powder-free gloves, that reduces the risk because proteins bond to powder and cause more latex to reach the skin. Or an allergic person could even inhale powder and have a reaction that way. Just as long as everybody?s doing proper handwashing, these problems shouldn?t be happening.?

Gene Vosberg, VP of the Washington State Restaurant Association, says the issue is ?certainly becoming a big factor? in his state, which has been trying to mandate glove use for a few years. ?We refuse to believe gloves are the silver bullet of food safety, and this only strengthens that point,? he adds.

The NRA?s Grover says the issue has become serious enough in the industry that the FDA is now looking into it again. ?We see them taking this very seriously and possibly rethinking some of their glove recommendations,? he says. ?Until then, I?m sure this problem will only get bigger.?

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Website: www.latexallergyresources.org

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