American Latex Allergy Association

# Geof's Story

I have a long history with Latex Allergies. My mother was allergic to Latex. She was a Hematologist working for several labs in Florida and Georgia, and in 1994 or 1995 she started having a topical rash when she wore latex gloves. In 1996 I too developed a rash and was told by the university?s rent-a-doc to avoid elastic in my clothing and latex gloves as I might be ?sensitive? to them. Comparing notes with my Mother we realized that we both had the same thing going on, and so she too started avoiding elastic and asked her laboratory to change her gloves for non-latex and her rash went away.

I was never fully serious about my sensitivity at the time, didn?t have any knowledge about cross-reactivity or other sources of latex in the environment and neither did my Mother. In 2001, my Mother had a heart attack, she went into the ER and then ICU. Her condition wouldn?t improve and her breathing kept getting worse, the Doctors put her on a ventilator. Days later I noticed she was itching her arm and had a rash, I casually mentioned to one of the RNs about her Latex sensitivity and you would have thought I set the place on fire. Catheters, bed sheets, gloves, pillows, everything whisked out of there and a equally large flurry of medications and Doctors rushed in. About three the next morning she removed her own breathing tube (faster than the RN could leap the charge desk) and started feeling much more human. One of the RNs suggested (rather strongly) that the rest of the family also get allergy tested for latex. I did, and was officially diagnosed as Latex allergic on the 21st of September 2001. My Mother?s heart gave out on the 23rd. One of the Doctors even said to me, ?the Latex reaction didn?t help.? So I became a little frantic, I tried to hide from anything Latex, but I really didn?t know what I was doing. I knew elastic was an issue and I knew gloves were an issue. At the time I volunteered as a First Responder and with the Red Cross so I still had routes of exposure, but I just held my breath or left the room and used non-latex gloves. Simple and Safe. (duh!! I was so innocent.)

Flash forward a few years and I had no serious reactions, and so I did want any crazy male would do.. I let my epi?s lapse. (?No need for those - I?m fine!? duh!!) In 2003, I was working outside and got swarmed by ants. Nine billion and one angry little bites later and my wife comes home to find a trail of clothes from the backyard into the house and then finds me wheezing in the shower. A few benadryl later and I?m fine, no worries - but I start thinking about getting those epi?s back in my hand. Later that year I ended up in the ER with bilateral kidney stones. When I went back to get a Lithotripsy the RN gave us a survey when we mentioned my Latex Allergy and my wife?s Latex sensitivity. This was the first place I learned about the cross-reactive foods and a light bulb went off with foods I?ve never enjoyed or that just tasted funny and that my mother?s last meal was tomato soup. (sigh!)

In 2005 I went in for a bit of dental surgery. We told the office I was Latex Allergic, they smiled and nodded and promptly ignored us. Each time the Dentist came in the room he would snap his gloves on and then the assistant would remind him about my allergy and he would mumble and snap his gloves off, usually right over my head. The fourth visit he did this and I suddenly found it very hard to breathe. The dental assistant gave me a lot of

benadryl and after a while my reaction calmed down. The Dentist, however, blamed me for having a panic attack. But I knew that feeling, as it was the same feeling I get when stung by insects, so I ignored him and went and got my epi?s back knowing that things really were getting serious. My Allergist and my GP (and my wife) wanted to throttle me for letting things get this bad. So I started then reaching out on the internet and trying to learn as much as I could to keep myself safe. I couldn?t tell you how many hours I?ve spent reading various message archives. I ordered NIOSH books and made up packets of information I printed and archived from the internet. I would carry these around and hand them out to anyone who I thought needed to know more about the allergy.

So flash forward to 2008, and I found myself attending Instructor training for the Community Emergency Response Team where I managed to have a teachable moment when I suffered a Latex reaction thanks to a box of blue latex gloves. (?oh no, we never use latex gloves, these are the blue ones.. see?? I turned the box around and pointed out the label which clearly read in 16 point font ?Latex Gloves? and then laughed (and wheezed) when 41 law enforcement officers, fire department members, county officials and state officials all gasped in unison. The state officer for CERT promised to be more careful. In 2009, I was proctoring a state CERT competition and had another teachable moment when a team came into my station fully gloved up - again I got more promises and apologies. In 2011, I attended another state CERT competition, but this time as a participant with assurances that there would really be no Latex this time. They were wrong, almost every competition station had something with latex, from several rescue randy to a whole boat load of rescue baby-dolls, to victims covered in stage make-up, they even had balloons.. it was an entertaining day to say the least. After that, the county decided my allergy was too much of a risk for them to deal with and banned me from all volunteer work with them and even barred me from attending public meetings (even though I was on seven different committees for the county) citing advise from their lawyer and concern over workman?s compensation insurance - even though I?d never once complained or even asked for assistance.

In 2012 my allergy got significantly worse, I suffered seventeen reactions in thirty days. Some of this came from exposure at work, where my Engineer started wearing latex gloves while working on the UPS Battery bank, and some of my exposure came from my wife. She works in the local Health Department and would carry home particles of latex on her clothing. To mitigate this, the engineer has switched to a non-latex glove and when my wife comes home from work, I turn off the air-conditioning and lock myself away in a sealed room while she places her scrubs in an air-tight hamper and takes a shower. But even as we solved these vectors we found others. I could not enter a grocery store, restaurant or even a bank without walking into latex balloons or latex gloves or both. I felt that I was quickly becoming locked away from participation in the world and my active lifestyle and dreams for the future crashed down around me. But I could not let this stop me, I had to do something to keep myself safe and able to be engaged with the world. I started looking for a service dog to alert me to latex in the environment so I could put on a particle filtration mask and leave the area, thus reducing the severity of my reaction. I found not a single professional service dog trainer who was willing to help, so I learned everything I could about the process on my own. After several long months of intense training, I now have a highly trained and successful service dog partner who, even in the short time we?ve been working together officially, has saved me from half-a-dozen latex filled environments.

Thus, I have decided now that I need to refocus my energy from just surviving with this allergy to really educating people about my allergy. I believe that while most people in the medical professions have at least heard of ?latex allergy? that a lot of others have not. So I have been handing out NIOSH packets to just about anyone who stands still too long, my neighbors, the letter carrier, restaurant managers, supermarket managers, my mechanic, the tax assessor, and even the town librarian all have a copy of the NIOSH packet and are spreading the word. I believe that ignorance is our real danger.

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