

# **Skin sensation & latex allergy**

## **The importance of skin**

Skin is the largest organ of the body. The skin's main function is to provide a barrier between the body and its environment, keeping out anything harmful such as germs or infections. It also prevents the loss of important body substances like water and helps regulate body temperature.

## **Skin sensation**

Sensory nerve endings in the skin respond to pain, touch, heat and cold and alert the body to contact from the outside giving warnings which help protect the body from injury.

## **How does spina bifida affect skin sensation?**

Due to damaged and improperly developed nerves people with spina bifida may have little or no feeling in some areas of the skin. Without sensation people with spina bifida will not feel heat, cold, pain, sharp objects, pressure, scrapes or excessive moisture and so damage to the skin may occur without their knowledge.

## **How much skin sensation is lost?**

As a general rule if there is loss of movement, there will be loss of skin sensation too. For example if there is no movement from mid-trunk level there will generally be no feeling in the skin from that level downwards. If the spina bifida lesion is lower than mid-trunk level however, it is not as straight forward with skin sensation present in some areas and not others.

## **Possible problems**

Some of the problems that may occur when there is loss of skin sensation include:

- **Burns** (sunburn, burns from hot drinks, food or from hot car/bus seats)
- **Scrapes** (on knees/ankles/toes when a child is crawling, on buttocks during transfers from wheelchair to chair)
- **Pressure areas** These are red areas of the skin, caused by prolonged pressure on one area

(often caused by poorly fitting shoes or splints). If these red areas disappear within 30 minutes they are no problem, but one which persists from day to day needs attention. These areas can develop into severe sores if not treated early and effectively. Treatment must always involve removing the pressure.

## **Skin protection**

Due to poor circulation and fragile skin in people with spina bifida, healing occurs slowly. Hence even small sores and burns require immediate attention, as they can worsen rapidly. Unattended sores may require lengthy hospitalisation and plastic surgery, as deeper-level skin tissue and muscle becomes affected.

## **Latex allergy**

People with spina bifida appear to have a higher than average risk of developing an allergy to latex. Latex is the sap of the rubber tree and is contained in all rubber products.

## **Latex is everywhere**

Latex products are everywhere. Latex is found in many everyday items such as balloons, household gloves, underwear, rubber bands and toys. It is also found in health care settings and since people with spina bifida often experience multiple surgical procedures and diagnostic tests they are regularly exposed to latex products.

## **Symptoms**

As with many allergic reactions, symptoms are sometimes limited to itchy eyes, runny nose or skin rashes however severe reactions can be life threatening. People with spina bifida should avoid exposure to latex in any form. Common symptoms are:

- Skin rash, hives, welts, swelling, redness
- Eye irritation
- Sneezing or coughing, wheezing
- Itchiness
- Difficulty breathing
- Chest pain or tightness
- Throat tightness
- Fainting or unconsciousness

***It is important for people with spina bifida and their carers to treat this allergy as a serious risk.***

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