

FACT SHEET F1. LATEX, USES, DOES AND DON'TS

What is Latex?

Latex and rubber are really one in the same, Latex being a more refined version than the rubbers used in products such as car tyres. It is a natural product which is bled from rubber trees, no more than tree sap; a material that will bio-degrade over a period of time, which can lead to certain problems in its usage. The first problem is that any latex product which is left in direct sunlight for long periods will decompose; by a long period we mean that a latex mask displayed in a window for two or three weeks will start to deteriorate, in normal usage there is no real problem; car tyres, for example, do not decompose in everyday use, but caravan tyres left parked in the same position for weeks, do. It is the ultra violet light in sunlight that has the harmful effect.

The second main cause for concern is any petroleum based products, these will react vigorously with latex, dissolving it like acid. Obvious products such as petrol, diesel, paraffin, engine oil, bicycle oil, must be avoided, also less obvious products such as Vaseline (petroleum jelly) brylcream, certain make-ups contain petroleum jelly and even less obvious- plastics. Plastics are derived from crude oil thus react with latex, however, polymers do not and to the naked eye there is no difference. So a polythene bag is OK but a plastic one is not. The outer case of your computer or TV could be plastic or polymer, you cannot tell!

Basic health do's and don'ts are; do not take internally, do not allow contact with the eyes, if contact occurs wash out immediately with cold water and seek medical advice.

Latex: Uses.

Latex has many uses; in fact it is probably one of the most versatile products on the planet. Car tyres, tap washers, shoe soles, condoms, heart valves, car seats (foam rubber), wet suits, window seals, carpet underlay and foam backing, electric insulation, paints, pencil rubbers, cycle inner tubes, football inners, rubber hoses, elastic bands, lycra swimwear etc etc, it is endless there is no one who does not use a latex or rubber product every day.

The uses we are interested in here are those that apply to theatre, TV and film. Those uses are in make-up, prosthetics, costume and props, a lot of which overlap.

Because of its flexibility and elasticity latex is ideal for certain make-up effects such as aging or wounds and various horror effects. Latex comes in the form of a thick milky liquid and can be painted or stippled directly onto the skin to create varying effects, it will dry quite quickly from body heat alone and becomes almost transparent on the skin, it does, however, contain ammonia, the fumes of which can cause the eyes to water. If any latex gets into the eye wash out immediately with cold water and seek immediate medical advice, it should not, however, give any adverse problems. It can be removed from the skin by simple rubbing. Do not get latex onto any hair as it will soak into the hair and dry, being waterproof when dry it

will have to be cut out, this also applies to clothing. Small amounts of latex can be removed from clothing, hair or brushes using Vaseline or paraffin but it has to be left to soak for a considerable time, until it has gone sticky, it can then be washed out using washing up liquid.

Latex can also be moulded in plaster of Paris using a basic slip moulding process. This is done by filling your mould with liquid latex, being careful not to trap any air in any undercuts, leave it to stand for approximately twenty to thirty minutes, depending on how thick you require the finished product to be, and then empty the surplus latex back into your original container for later use. You will be left with a thick creamy deposit of latex all over the inside of your mould, this, when dry, will be your finished product.

After a reasonable drying time, examine your product carefully, if there are any pale patches then it is not dry enough to remove. When you are sure that it is dry completely brush the inside of the product with talc, this can be polished off later but is necessary to stop the latex sticking to itself. You can now gently peel your product from the mould, being careful not to break any fine detail within the mould, you will then need to leave your product to dry out thoroughly, whilst keeping it in its intended shape, for approximately twenty four hours; if you attempt to paint your product before it has dried out thoroughly then you will get moisture trapped between the paint and the latex and this will cause the paint to flake off. Before painting you will need to trim your product, to do this you will need a firm, sharp pair of scissors, slide the scissors into the cut as cutting so as not to get a raggedy cut, remember that latex is flexible and use that property to help you in your trimming. It is important to make sure you have a clean cut edge and there are no "nicks" as these will make an easy rip line in the product.

Painting latex is difficult, you can get special paints from some art shops but they are rare. The best option for domestic use is acrylic paints which can be purchased from any art shop. You will however need to mix a small amount of latex with the acrylic to give it the flexibility needed but this is a trial and error process depending on the colour you are using. You can pigment the latex to a basic colour using latex pigments or acrylic paint and then use latex grease paints (make-up) which can both be obtained from Charles Fox of London and other theatrical make up specialists. For a metallic finish the Christmas lacquer sprays work very well, available mainly in silver and gold. This gives an ideal finish for armour and helmets etc.

We supply two types of latex, one which is softer and more suitable for masks and prosthetics and more flexible products, also for the making of latex moulds for casting resin or plaster statues, these moulds are made by taking your original sculpture or form and dipping it in latex, waiting for it to dry then dipping it again and repeating the process until you have a thick layer; when it has dried thoroughly dust it with talc and peel it off the form. You may need to make a hard backing to your latex mould out of plaster or resin, depending on the size, before removing from the form. If you are casting a resin piece you will need to coat the inside of the mould with a suitable release agent such as soap and allow to dry before casting.

The second latex is harder, has the cross properties of latex and cardboard, the durability of latex but the rigidity of cardboard. This is more suitable for armour, helmets, weapons and larger carnival type head masks and props. The best glue to use with latex for fixing hair etc is Evo Stick contact adhesive, the one in the red tubes and tins, available from any good hardware.

Latex shrinks as it dries the soft latex approximately 5% the hard latex up to 10%. This is an important consideration in the making of prosthetics and other items and has to be compensated for in your original sculpture. This is difficult to do and experience is the only tool you can use.

Fitting and Care of Latex Products.

When you receive one of our latex products it will be trimmed, may be painted if it is a mask, or not painted if it is a prosthetic. Your product should be placed in position on the desired part of your body, then mark it with a soft pencil, such as an eye liner, where it needs to be trimmed for the best fit, remembering the cutting guidelines above, also remember that you can always cut more off, but if you cut too much off you won't be able to put it back on. If necessary it can then be fixed in place where it touches your skin using spirit gum or liquid latex, you can also use liquid latex to feather out the edges of your product, blending it into your skin using a cotton bud or similar. When dry apply suitable make up to the product so that it looks part of you. To remove simply rub an edge until you can hold it enough to gently peel the prosthetic off. Remove make up from skin and prosthetic with a suitable make up remover and any spirit gum with surgical spirits.

You can wash your latex product using warm water and washing up liquid and finally rinsing off with clean water, allow to dry then dust the inside of the product with talc to stop it sticking to itself. Then store your product in a dark place making sure it does not come into contact with any petroleum based products. Pillow cases make good storage bags for masks.

The uses for latex are endless it gives an excellent reproduction from the mould right down to subtle textures, the only limits being your own skills, remember though, all that we have said above and that it can be a messy product.....Get rubbered!

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