Poison Ivy Toolbox Talk

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Poison ivy sap is present in nearly every part of the plant, including the leaves, stems, and roots.

The sap contains an oil called urushiol, which is a pale yellow, sticky, oily substance that is also present in poison oak and poison sumac.

WHAT’S THE DANGER?

Poison ivy rash is caused by an allergic reaction to an oily resin called urushiol (u-ROO-she-ol). This oily resin is in the leaves, stems and roots of poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac.

The rash usually appears within 3 days of the exposure to the oil, but the time frame can vary significantly. The more sensitive a person is to poison ivy, the faster the rash may appear.

Signs of a reaction

- intense itching
- red skin or red streaks
- red bumps, which are called papules
- swelling
- blisters, often developing in lines and oozing
- crusting skin

The rash is not contagious, and it does not spread to other areas of the body. If it appears to be spreading, this will be due to a delayed reaction or further contact with objects that remain contaminated.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

First comes the itching, then a red rash, and then blisters. These

symptoms of poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac can emerge any time from a few hours to several days after exposure to the plant oil found in the sap of these poisonous plants. The culprit: the urushiol oil. **Here are some tips to avoid it.**

Recognize Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac

- **Poison Ivy:** Found throughout the United States except Alaska, Hawaii, and parts of the West Coast. Can grow as a vine or small shrub trailing along the ground or climbing on low plants, trees and poles. Each leaf has three glossy leaflets, with smooth or toothed edges. Leaves are reddish in spring, green in summer, and yellow, orange, or red in fall. May have greenish-white flowers and whitish-yellow berries.
- **Poison Oak:** Grows as a low shrub in the Eastern and Southern United States, and in tall clumps or long vines on the Pacific Coast. Fuzzy green leaves in clusters of three are lobed or deeply toothed with rounded tips. May have yellow-white berries.
- **Poison Sumac:** Grows as a tall shrub or small tree in bogs or swamps in the Northeast, Midwest, and parts of the Southeast. Each leaf has clusters of seven to 13 smooth-edged leaflets. Leaves are orange in spring, green in summer, and yellow, orange, or red in fall. May have yellow-greenish flowers and whitish-green fruits hang in loose clusters.

Poison Plant Rashes Not Contagious

Poison ivy and other poison plant rashes can’t be spread from person to person. But it is possible to pick up the rash from plant oil that may have stuck to clothing, pets, garden tools, and other items that have come in contact with these plants. The plant oil lingers (sometimes for years) on virtually any surface until it’s washed off with water or rubbing alcohol.

Plant Oil Touches Skin

The rash will occur only where the plant oil has touched the skin,

so a person with poison ivy can’t spread it on the body by scratching. It may seem like the rash is spreading if it appears over time instead of all at once. But this is either because the plant oil is absorbed at different rates on different parts of the body or because of repeated exposure to contaminated objects or plant oil trapped under the fingernails. Even if blisters break, the fluid in the blisters is not plant oil and cannot further spread the rash.

TIPS FOR TREATMENT

Don’t scratch the blisters. Bacteria from under your fingernails can get into them and cause an infection. The rash, blisters, and itch normally disappear in several weeks without any treatment.

You can relieve the itch by:

- Using wet compresses or soaking in cool water.
- Applying over-the-counter (OTC) topical corticosteroid preparations or taking prescription oral corticosteroids.
- Applying topical OTC skin protectants, such as zinc acetate, zinc carbonate, zinc oxide, and calamine dry the oozing and weeping of poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac. Protectants such as baking soda or colloidal oatmeal relieve minor irritation and itching. Aluminum acetate is an astringent that relieves rash.

GET MEDICAL HELP IF:

- You have a temperature over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.
- There is pus, soft yellow scabs, or tenderness on the rash.
- The itching gets worse or keeps you awake at night.
- The rash spreads to your eyes, mouth, genital area, or covers more than one-fourth of your skin area.
- The rash is not improving within a few weeks.
- The rash is widespread and severe.
- You have difficulty breathing.

It’s an oil in these plants that causes the rash. By taking some precautions, you may be able to prevent the oil from getting on your skin. Here’s what you can do:

Protect your skin when outdoors: Poison ivy and oak grow in all states, except Alaska and Hawaii. Poison sumac is found in many states. When you'll be in a wooded area or place known to have poisonous plants, you can:

- **Cover up with clothing:** Wear long sleeves, pants, socks, and boots. If you'll be working with plants, wear gloves.
- **Apply an ivy blocker to your skin:** If you know you'll be in an area with lots of underbrush, this can give you an extra layer of protection. It's meant to be used along with long pants, gloves, and other clothing. You'll find these non-prescription products online and in stores.

Wash everything after being outside: After being outdoors in a woody area or a place where poisonous plants may grow, you want to make sure you wash off any oil. To do this, put on a pair of disposable gloves and:

- **Machine-wash the clothing you wore.** This includes hats and gloves. Wash everything in hot water and detergent as soon as you get home. The disposable gloves help you avoid getting oil on your skin. Be sure to wear the gloves while taking off your clothes and putting them in the wash machine.
- **Clean all tools and other equipment by wiping them down with rubbing alcohol or washing them with soap and lots of water.** The oil can remain on a surface for months or years until it's washed off.
- **Bathe pets.** The oil from these plants can stick to their fur.

Take a shower. You'll want to take a lukewarm shower and wash gently. Be sure to wash under your nails and rinse well.

FINAL WORD

Education is key in dealing with poison ivy. Central is to expose two significant misconceptions. The first is poison ivy rash is not spread by weeping blisters and, secondly, poison ivy cannot be spread from person to person (ie) not contagious.