

HIKER-NOTE: All about Poison Ivy and How to Avoid it!

UGA OUTDOOR RECREATION CENTER
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Poison Ivy



Poison Oak



Poison Sumac



As the weather warms up and we engage in more outdoor activities, we face a common enemy: poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac. Here are some basic facts about these annoying plants, as well as some tips on protecting yourself from their noxious effect: a blistering, itchy rash that may last for several weeks.

The rash is due to an allergic reaction to a chemical called urushiol, which is found throughout the entire plant (leaves, branches, berries, bark, and roots). More than half of all people are sensitive to this chemical but, fortunately, the rash tends to become less severe as we grow older.

Urushiol soaks into the skin within 10 to 60 minutes after contact but the actual rash usually doesn't start to appear for 12 to 48 hours after the plant was touched. Areas exposed to smaller amounts of urushiol, as well as those body parts covered with thicker skin, will take longer to develop a reaction. This means you shouldn't be surprised if new areas of redness, itching, and blistering still crop up many days after the rash's initial blossoming.

Here are some strategies to help you prevent or control the itchy rash:

Learn to recognize and avoid the plants. The general rule is "Leaves of three, let them be." Unfortunately, leaf colors and shapes vary a lot from plant to plant and from species to species. These plants can also grow as woody vines, shrubs, or even small trees. Furthermore, leafless branches (in wintertime, or even for a few years after the plant has died) still contain the poison, so never touch or pull on a seemingly dead poison ivy vine.

Create barriers between the leaves and your skin. If you can't seem to consistently avoid poison ivy, the next best protection against urushiol is to throw up barriers between you and it. Wearing long sleeves, long pants, and gloves can be helpful when walking or

working in the woods or garden, although not always practical in warmer weather. Keep in mind that urushiol can soak through many materials, so heavy or prolonged exposures may defeat your cloth barriers. Creams containing bentoquatam (Ivy Block®) can protect the skin from urushiol, but do not always prevent a rash. Other creams may be helpful for some people.

Wash everything you may touch that could have come into contact with the plant.

You can also get poison ivy from sources other than the plant itself. Once urushiol is deposited on something that item can spread the rash until the chemical is washed away. The most common examples are fingernails, garden tools, and clothing. In addition, outdoor pets can carry the oil on their fur and transfer large amounts to you when they return home.

Know that popped blisters cannot spread the rash. Contrary to popular belief, the fluid from within the blisters will not cause the rash to spread. New lesions appearing in straight lines a few days after the initial rash are usually due to smaller quantities of urushiol that got deposited on the skin as it brushed lightly against a twig or leaf. These lesser exposures take longer to show up as a rash on the skin.

Avoid scratching. You also can't spread the rash simply by scratching the affected area. But do try to resist the temptation, because scratching may injure the skin and increase the risk of infection. Another good reason not to scratch: Urushiol can linger under fingernails for several days, so (if you simply must scratch that fiery itch) be sure to wash well under your fingernails to avoid new exposures.

Even with your best effort, sometimes you just can't completely avoid these nuisance plants. Then it's time to seek out treatment.



JOHNS HOPKINS
MEDICINE

By Howard Levy, M.D.



Urushiol Oil is Potent

- Only 1 nanogram (billionth of a gram) needed to cause rash
- Average is 100 nanograms for most people
- 1/4 ounce of urushiol is all that is needed to cause a rash in every person on earth
- 500 people could itch from the amount covering the head of a pin
- Specimens of urushiol several centuries old have found to cause dermatitis in sensitive people.
- 1 to 5 years is normal for urushiol oil to stay active on any surface including dead plants
- Derived from **urushi**, Japanese name for lacquer

When the Japanese restored the gold leaf on the golden Temple in Kyoto, they painted the urushiol lacquer on it to preserve and maintain the gold. Guess you could say that you would be caught red handed if you stole it.

Poison Ivy, Oak, and Sumac

- Most common allergy in the country claiming half the population
- Sensitivity to urushiol can develop at any time
- Solutions or cures are those that annihilate urushiol
- Everyone appears to react slightly different to all the remedies.
- Covered by workers compensation in some states (CA, for example)
- First published records of poison ivy in North America date back to 1600s
- Poison Ivy coined by Captain John Smith in 1609
- Western Poison Oak discovered by David Douglas (1799-1834) on Vancouver Island. Douglas fir also named after him.
- People with serious deficiency in cellular (T-cell) immunity such as AIDS patients may not have problems with dermatitis.

Myths vs. Facts

 Myth	 Fact
Poison Ivy rash is contagious.	Rubbing the rashes won't spread poison ivy to other parts of your body (or to another person). You spread the rash only if urushiol oil -- the sticky, resinlike substance that causes the rash -- has been left on your hands.
You can catch poison ivy simply by being near the plants	Direct contact is needed to release urushiol oil . Stay away from forest fires, direct burning, or anything else that can cause the oil to become airborne such as a lawnmower, trimmer, etc.
Leaves of three, let them be	Poison sumac has 7 to 13 leaves on a branch, although poison ivy and oak have 3 leaves per cluster.
Do not worry about dead plants	Urushiol oil stays active on any surface, including dead plants, for up to 5 years.
Breaking the blisters releases urushiol oil that can spread	Not true. But your wounds can become infected and you may make the scarring worse. In very extreme cases, excessive fluid may need to be withdrawn by a doctor.
I've been in poison ivy many times and never broken out. I'm immune.	Not necessarily true. Upwards of 90% of people are allergic to urushiol oil, it's a matter of time and exposure. The more times you are exposed to urushiol, the more likely it is that you will break out with an allergic rash. For the first time sufferer, it generally takes longer for the rash to show up - generally in 7 to 10 days.

Citation: Poison Ivy, Oak, & Sumac Information Center