

Poison Ivy, Oak, and Sumac

Toolbox Talk

Employers and employees should take precautions when working in and around wooded areas and in heavy foliage because they may come in contact with poison ivy, oak, or sumac. According to the American Skin Association, approximately 85 percent of the population is allergic to these plants that cause a bothersome rash and intense itching.

The sap of poison ivy, oak, and sumac plants contains urushiol (pronounced oo-roo-shee-ohl) oil and it only takes small amounts of this chemical to cause an allergic reaction. Urushiol is inside the plant, so brushing against an intact plant will not usually cause a reaction. However, undamaged plants are rare, and touching the stems, roots, or leaves of damaged plants can result in direct contact between urushiol and the skin. If urushiol penetrates the skin, it can cause a reaction. Urushiol can stick to anything, including tools, shoes, clothes, or pets.

Avoiding Exposure

1. Employees should wear long pants, long sleeves, boots, and gloves for protection when working in wooded areas and in heavy foliage.
2. After consulting with their doctor, an employee may use barrier skin creams such as lotion containing bentoquatam. These should be washed off and reapplied twice a day.
3. Control poison ivy, oak, and sumac at a worksite by spraying them with the herbicide glyphosate according to label directions. These plants should not be burned because urushiol could then be inhaled and cause lung irritation. The best time to apply the herbicide is from May through July while poison ivy, oak, and sumac are flowering. For plants that climb high into trees, cut the vine off six inches above ground level. Treat the stump with glyphosate immediately after cutting to kill the roots and prevent sprouting. If re-sprouting does occur, treat the leaves with glyphosate.



Myth and Fact Explained

Myth	Fact
Poison ivy rash is contagious.	Rubbing the rash will not spread poison ivy to other parts of your body (or to another person). You spread the rash only if urushiol oil, the sticky resin like substance that causes the rash, has been left on your hands.
You can catch poison ivy simply by being near the plants.	Direct contact with the plants is needed to release urushiol oil. Stay away from forest fires, direct burning, and lawnmowers and trimmers when they are being used because they can cause the urushiol oil to become airborne.
Leaves of three, let them be.	While poison ivy and oak have three leaves per cluster, poison sumac has seven to 13 leaves on a branch.
Do not worry about dead plants.	Urushiol oil stays active on any surface, including dead plants, for up to five years
Breaking the blisters releases urushiol oil that can spread.	Not true. However, wounds can become infected and 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. The more times a person is exposed to urushiol, the more likely they will break out with an allergic reaction. For the first-time sufferer, it generally takes longer for the rash to show up, generally in seven to ten days.

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What to Do if Exposed

Because urushiol can penetrate the skin within minutes, do not waste time if exposed. The faster the victim's skin is cleansed, the greater the chance of removing the urushiol before it penetrates the skin. Cleansing may not stop the initial outbreak of the rash if more than ten minutes has passed, but it can help prevent the rash from spreading.

If exposed to poison ivy, oak or sumac, stay indoors (if possible) until the following steps are completed. Wear gloves or cover hands while completing the steps and then discard the hand covering.

1. Cleanse exposed skin with generous amounts of isopropyl (rubbing) alcohol immediately. Do not return to the woods or yard the same day. Alcohol removes your skin's protection along with the urushiol, and any new contact will cause the urushiol to penetrate twice as fast.
2. Wash exposed skin with water.
3. Take a shower with soap and warm water. Do not use soap before this point because soap could pick up some of the urushiol from the surface of the skin and move it around.
4. Wipe off shoes, tools, and anything else that may have been in contact with the urushiol with alcohol and water.
5. Wash clothing separately in hot water and detergent.

Dealing with the Rash

If the exposed area is not cleansed quickly or thoroughly enough, or if the skin is so sensitive that cleansing does not help, redness and swelling may appear within 12 to 48 hours. Blisters and itching will follow. For those rare people who react after their very first exposure, the rash appears after seven to ten days. The oozing blisters are not contagious nor can the fluid cause further spread on the affected person's body because they do not contain urushiol. Nevertheless, scratching the blisters with fingernails that may carry germs could cause an infection.

The rash will only occur where urushiol has touched the skin; it does not spread throughout the body. However, the rash may seem to spread if it appears over time instead of all at once. This is either because

the urushiol is absorbed at different rates in different parts of the body or because of repeated exposure to contaminated objects or urushiol trapped under the fingernails.

Consult a physician before using any of the following remedies.

Itch Relief

The rash, blisters, and itch normally disappear in 14 to 20 days without any treatment. Temporary itch relief may be found by using:

- Wet compresses or soaking in cool water;
- Oral or topical antihistamines;
- Over-the-counter topical corticosteroids (commonly called hydrocortisones); or
- Topical anesthetics to numb the itchy rash, such as menthol, benzocaine, and pramoxine

Treating the Blisters

There are a number of over the counter products to help dry up oozing blisters including:

- aluminum acetate;
- baking soda;
- oatmeal bath;
- aluminum hydroxide gel;
- calamine;
- kaolin;
- zinc acetate;
- zinc carbonate; and
- zinc oxide.

Signs of an Emergency

For severe cases, prescription topical corticosteroid drugs can halt the reaction, but only if treatment begins within a few hours of exposure. The American Academy of Dermatology recommends that people who have had severe reactions in the past should contact a dermatologist as soon as possible after a new exposure.

In rare cases, persons who are highly allergic to poison ivy, oak, and sumac may break out in a rash and begin to swell in four to 12 hours. Their eyes may swell shut and blisters may erupt on their skin. This is an emergency. Call 911 and get the victim to a hospital as soon as possible.

