

POISON IVY BEST PRACTICES

Poison ivy is prevalent and grows as a vine on trees, rock walls, or buildings. If no such support is nearby, poison ivy will grow as a small bush or shrub. Poison ivy has many relatives, which can cause a similar rash on sensitive persons. This group includes poison oak and poison sumac.



Pictures courtesy of poison-ivy.org



A typical poison ivy leaf comprises three leaflets joined at a common stalk. The leaflets are often colored slightly reddish (but not always) at the stem. The leaflets may have toothed edges (as in poison oak) or be smooth. Grape-like clumps of greenish, white berries appear in mid-summer, and the leaves turn an orange-yellow or red in fall.

How Does Poison Ivy Cause a Rash?

The rash occurs after a person allergic to poison ivy gets Urushiol (oo-rō-she-all) oil found in the sap from the plant on the skin. The plant must be damaged (bruised or cut) before the sap can escape, so touching an undamaged plant will usually not cause a rash. Damaging any part of the plant, such as brush cutting (including the vine and roots), any time of year will release enough sap to cause problems. Smoke from burning the plant can also cause a rash or worse reactions if inhaled. Pets, tools, and clothing can carry the sap to the skin for weeks.

Dead plants and dry roots will hold the oil for up to five years. Knowledge and avoidance of the plant are critical. Appropriate clothing is the best prevention if you must work around poison ivy. Some "barrier creams" can effectively prevent or slow the absorption of the poison ivy sap into the skin but washing with soap and water is still required as soon as practical after exposure. Clothing in contact should be carefully handled and washed before wearing again. Once the sap gets on the skin, it soaks in quickly. Washing with soap and cool water within 10 or 20 minutes of exposure may prevent the rash. But washing within an hour of exposure can reduce the seriousness of the inflammation. The rash may start as early as six hours or two weeks after exposure. The rash cannot be spread by scratching or by the blister fluid. It usually heals within two or three weeks. Broken blisters can become infected like any other open wound and should be protected. The rash will itch and swell more with a hot shower, whirlpool, or sauna, so cool baths or showers will be more comfortable. Minor itching, pain, oozing, and swelling can be relieved with over-the-counter anti-itch treatments that contain zinc acetate, diphenhydramine HCl, menthol zinc oxide, or hydrocortisone. A physician can prescribe antihistamine creams, tablets, or shots in severe cases.

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