

IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

POISON IVY, POISON OAK, AND POISON SUMAC: CAUSES OF NON-INFECTIOUS RASHES

Most people have had the unpleasant experience of a rash from poison ivy and/or poison oak or poison sumac. These plants contain oil that “bonds” to skin on contact. The oil can stay active on any surface including dead plants and objects for up to 5 years, so an individual may develop the rash in any season, not just summer. Most people are allergic to the oil and will develop an itchy, red rash if it gets it on their skin.

A person can get the oil on their skin by:

- Touching any of these plants.
- Touching clothing, including shoes, that has come in contact with these plants.
- Touching objects, such as gardening tools that may have the oil on them.
- Touching pets that have been around these plants and have gotten the oil on their fur.
- Exposure can also occur when these plants are burned. This is the most serious form of exposure with airborne sap-coated soot getting into the eyes, nose, throat and respiratory system.

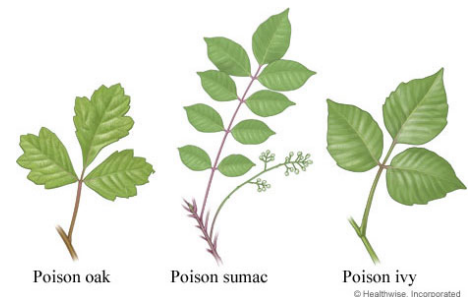
Poison ivy rash is not contagious. Scratching poison ivy rash only spreads it if the plant oil still remains on the skin. Once the oil has bonded to the skin, it cannot be transferred to another person or object, and there is no free oil in the blisters or in the rash. Scratching the rash may cause a secondary bacterial infection, which can be severe. These secondary infections require medical attention.

Prevention

The best way to prevent the rash is to avoid contact with these plants. People who spend time outdoors in areas where these plants live should wear a long sleeve shirt and pants. Anyone who is handling poison ivy or its kin should wear gloves. After exposure to the oil, a person should remove and immediately wash clothing, gloves and boots or shoes in detergent or soap. Clean yard tools with rubbing alcohol or soap and lots of water. Wear disposable gloves during this process. Do not burn plants that may be poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac. However, when exposure to burning poisonous plants is unavoidable, exposed people should wear a face mask rated R-95, P-95, or better.

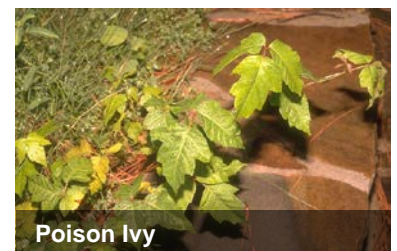
Recognition

The old saying “Leaves of three, Let it be!” is a helpful reminder for identifying poison ivy and oak, but not poison sumac which usually has clusters of 7-13 leaves. Even poison ivy and poison oak may have more than three leaves and their form may vary greatly depending upon the exact species encountered, the local environment, and the season. Being able to identify local varieties of these poisonous plants throughout the seasons are the major keys to avoiding exposure.



Poison Ivy

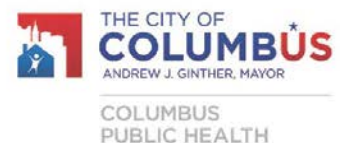
Poison Ivy is found across the United States, except California, Alaska, and Hawaii. There is an eastern and a western type, both of which may be found in the Midwest. Eastern poison ivy is typically a hairy, ropelike vine with three shiny green (or red in the fall) pointed leaflets budding from one small stem. The edges of the leaflets may be smooth or toothed. Western poison ivy is typically a low shrub with three leaves that does not form a climbing vine. Poison ivy may have yellow or green flowers and white to green-yellow or amber berries. Most common in the edges of woods, flood plains, lake shores, stream banks, along fences and around buildings.



c/o Franklin County Public Health, 280 East Broad Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215-4562

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Poison Oak

Similar to poison ivy except its three leaflets are lobed with rounded tips. In the east, poison oak lives in sandy soil, dry barrens, sand hills, and oak-pine or pine woods. In the west, it is found in low places, thickets and wooded slopes. It lives in the southeastern U.S. and the Pacific coast.

Poison Sumac

Woody shrub that has stems that contain 7-13 leaves arranged in pairs. May have glossy, pale yellow, or cream-colored berries. Poison Sumac is abundant along the Mississippi River and boggy areas of the Southeast.

What is the rash like?

The rash is the same for poison oak, ivy and sumac. The rash will usually begin to appear 1 to 2 days after coming in contact with oil from the plant. The affected area will get red and swollen. A day or so later, small blisters will begin to form, and the rash will become very itchy. During this time, it's important to try to keep from scratching the blisters. Bacteria from under fingernails can get into the blisters and cause an infection. After about a week, the blisters will start to dry up and the rash will start to go away. In severe cases, where the poison ivy rash covers large parts of the body, it may last much longer.

How is poison ivy treated?

Oil from these plants can bond to skin within minutes. People who think that they have come in contact with a poisonous plant should wash the area with cool water and soap as soon as possible. This may help to get some of the oil off the skin and possibly prevent or lessen the reaction. Products that contain solvents such as mineral oil may help to remove the oil from your skin.

Once a rash starts to develop, there are several over-the-counter medications you can use to relieve the itching, including:

- Hydrocortisone creams (one brand name: Cortizone-10)
- Calamine lotion
- Antihistamine tablets (one brand name: Benadryl)
- Oatmeal baths
- Topical anti-itching medicines (one brand name: Itch-X)

Check with a pediatrician for dosing of these medicines for young children.

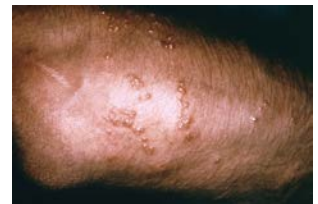
Medical attention should be sought for:

- A fever over 100 degrees
- The rash covers large areas of the body
- The rash is in the eyes, mouth or genital area
- There is pus coming from the blisters
- The rash does not get better after a few days
- Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room if the person has signs of a severe allergic reaction, such as swelling or difficulty breathing, or has had a severe reaction in the past.

All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.

Images from: www.poisonivy.aesir.com, www.myhealth.centralhealth.com and www.cdc.gov

The above information was taken from websites from The American Academy of Family Physicians, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and MedicineNet.com.



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