



Central Michigan District Health Department

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“Just The Facts”

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Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac

What are Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac?

Poison ivy is a plant which grows in all 50 states, usually occurring as a climbing vine. It can also grow as a small shrub or even large enough to resemble a tree. Poison ivy grows with clusters of three leaflets. Blossoms appear in the spring, and the leaves turn red in the fall, with clusters of white berries forming at the base.

Poison oak grows mainly on the West Coast. It usually grows as a shrub or a small tree and has oak-like leaves in clusters of three. Fine hair grows on the leaves and the trunk, and yellow berries appear in the late summer.

Poison sumac is found mainly in the Southeast, but sometimes shows up in the West and in Canada. It loves wet areas and grows as a tall, thin shrub, with 7-13 leaflets per cluster and cream-colored berries.

All three plants are found in the woods, along roadsides, and in clearings. All parts of the plants, except the pollen, produce urushiol, a substance to which most people are extremely sensitive. Sensitivity may develop after one, two, or even dozens of exposures, so it is never safe to assume that you are immune. Urushiol can also be transferred to people from pets' fur, clothing and shoes, firewood, gardening tools, and even hands.

What are the signs and symptoms of exposure?

- Itching
- A burning, red rash lasting 1-3 weeks
- Oozing blisters which crust over within 2-3 weeks

What can I do to relieve the itching?

- Cleanse the infected area with water and dishwashing liquid
- Apply cold compresses of equal parts milk and water
- Apply 0.5% cortisone cream; don't use cream on face or around eyes
- Apply pastes of baking soda and water
- Apply calamine lotion
- Take pain medication that has been recommended by a physician
- Consider taking oral antihistamine, such as Benadryl
- Avoid the sun which can aggravate the rash
- Launder all exposed clothing and clean shoes with equal parts of rubbing alcohol and water

If the rash develops pus, or if the face, eyelids or hands swell, seek medical attention immediately!



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How can I prevent exposure?

- Remember, "leaves of three, let it be".
- Apply a coating of a protective cream, such as Surokocarb, Cutaneous Cream, to exposed areas.

Robert W. Ghera, MD
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where these plant grow.

- Wear long pants and long sleeves **"Just The Facts"** if you work with these plants.
- Do not burn poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac. Doing so releases urushiol into the air and inflames the skin.
- Wash hands, arms, etc. with Fell's Naphtha soap to inactivate the urushiol.

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