



Central Michigan District Health Department

Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities



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Poison Ivy/Poison Oak/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, but also Southern States. 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?

The first symptom of poisoning is a severe itching of the skin. Later, a red inflammation and a blistering of the skin occurs. In severe cases, oozing sores develop. The rash spreads by the poisonous sap (urushiol), not as the result of contamination from sores. The blood vessels develop gaps that leak fluid through the skin, causing blisters and oozing. When you cool the skin, the vessels constrict and don't leak as much.

How is it spread?

Approximately 24 to 36 hours after a sensitized person is exposed to the urushiol, a blistering, itching rash develops. Usually within 15 minutes of contact, the urushiol binds to skin proteins. If it is washed off with soap and water before that time, a reaction may be prevented. After the antigen is fixed, however, it cannot be washed off or transferred to other areas. Scratching or oozing blister fluid cannot spread the antigen to other areas of the body or to other persons.

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What can I do to relieve the itching?

- Cleanse the infected area with water and soap
- Apply cold compresses
- Apply 0.5% cortisone cream; don't use cream on face or around eyes
- 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

How can I prevent exposure?

- Wear long sleeves, long pants, boots, and gloves.
- Wash exposed clothing separately in hot water with detergent.
- Barrier skin creams, such as lotion containing bentoquatam, may offer some protection before contact. Barrier creams should be washed off and reapplied twice a day.
- After use, clean tools with rubbing alcohol or soap and lots of water. Urushiol can remain active on the surface of objects for up to 5 years.
- Do not burn poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac. Doing so releases urushiol into the air and inflames the skin. Inhaling smoke from burning plants can cause severe. Allergic respiratory problems.