

Poison Ivy

Safety at Work



Each year, an estimated 25-40 million people in the U.S. will feel the infamous itch of poison ivy, a plant found throughout North America that typically grows in the form of a vine often along riverbanks. For most, this itchy rash will appear one or two days after they have been exposed to the plant, and the condition can last anywhere from 10 days to three weeks. More than 50% of people are sensitive to the colorless, odorless resin, urushiol, found in the leaves of poison ivy.

The best method to prevent a poison ivy allergic reaction is to avoid exposure. Doing that, you avoid the need for poison ivy first aid.

Avoid Exposure

Know what Poison Ivy looks like

Poison Ivy usually has three small leaves growing off of the same stem. The leaves are green in the summer months and turn red in the fall months. You can also identify them by the green or yellow flowers and white berries that also grow on the vines. Familiarize yourself with the plants growing in your area of the country and how they look at different times of the year so you can steer clear of poison ivy and other plants that may cause an allergic reaction.

Wear Appropriate Clothing

Wear long sleeved shirts and pants when working in areas that have poison ivy. You should also wear high boots and keep your pant legs tucked into them.

Wash Clothing

Remove and immediately wash any clothing that has come in contact with the poison ivy plant.

Wash Hands

Wash your hands after touching any plants that could be poison ivy. Do not touch other parts of your body with dirty hands.

First Aid for Poison Ivy

If your skin is exposed to poison ivy, there are a few things you can do to relieve the pain.

1. Wash your skin as quickly as possible with soap and cold, running water. Do this within minutes of coming into contact with the plant to prevent the oil from absorbing into the skin. Avoid vigorously scrubbing the area or using hot water since this may further open pores or cause more irritation to the skin.
2. Avoid rubbing or scratching the affected skin. It can cause the skin to break and spread the poison ivy to a larger area.
3. Cool off. People with poison ivy exposure tend to find relief from cool baths or cool compresses. You can use a towel with ice cubes wrapped in it on the area, or massage the affected area with an ice cube for relief. Allowing the area to air dry will reduce itching and oozing of blisters.
4. Use oral or topical antihistamines. Oral antihistamines such as Benadryl will help to reduce the itch of poison ivy. Use calamine lotion to reduce itching and redness.
5. Stop the rash from spreading to others. The fluid from the sores caused by poison ivy is not contagious. The rash caused by poison ivy will only spread to other areas of the body if the oil from the plant is spread. Once the oil has been removed from the skin, it is no longer possible to expose others.
6. Wash clothing and shoes. Be sure to wash the items you were wearing when you came into contact with the poison ivy. Use soap and hot water to remove any oil from the plant.
7. Give Fido a bath and wash tools. If a pet was exposed, the oils can spread via your pet's fur, or even on other items such as gardening tools. Thoroughly washing both pets and other items that may have come into contact with poison ivy to remove the oils.
8. If the reaction is severe, seek medical attention. Most cases of poison ivy can be handled at home, however poison ivy can be extremely serious or even fatal. In rare cases, poison ivy exposure can become severe in someone who's highly sensitized to the reaction, or if someone is exposed to a large amount of the oil, either by breathing in fumes when the plant is being burned or having the oils enter areas of broken skin.

The old adage, "leaves of three, let them be" is often easier said than done, if you plan on spending much time outside this summer.

For more information, visit these websites:

University of Michigan Health Topics A-Z -- Poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac:

http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/pa/pa_tnpoisiv_hhg.htm

U.S. Food and Drug Administration -- Outsmarting poison ivy and its cousins:

http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/796_ivy.html

Medline Plus --Poison ivy, oak and sumac rash:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000027.htm>