

POISON IVY, OAK, & SUMAC

TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

6.4

DESCRIPTION

Poison ivy, oak, and sumac are three types of plants that cause a skin reaction (contact dermatitis). The reaction results from a contact with an oily substance (resin) produced by these plants. This particular allergic reaction is the most common in the United States. About 50% of the total population has developed an allergy to these plants.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Skin rash with the following signs:

- Bright red spots that develop 24 to 48 hours (sometimes may take several days) after contact.
- Weeping, crusting, and swelling
- Intense itching and burning
- Blisters (the fluid in blisters is not contagious).
- Enough of the oily resin remains on hands or clothing so that the rash is carried to other body parts, such as the face or genitals.

CAUSES

Contact with any part of the poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac plants. They grow as vines or bushes and have three leaves (poison ivy and poison oak), or a row of paired leaves (poison sumac). They produce a potent resin (urushiol) that is the cause of the problem. A reaction may also occur from touching the poison substance when it is on clothing, equipment (hunting, golfing, or athletic), or animals, such as pets. It can also come from any smoke these plants give off if they are burned. This may affect the face, eyelids, throat, and lungs.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Spring and summer (though plants are dangerous year round).
- Not wearing protective clothing.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Learn to identify and avoid contact with these plants.
- When walking in areas where these plants grow, wear shoes, socks, long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and, sometimes gloves. Wash this clothing right after you return, if possible. Use a product that prevents the poison from getting on your skin.
- If you are exposed, washing the skin immediately with soap and water and sponging with rubbing alcohol may prevent the rash.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Itching, redness, and swelling are often improved by the second day, and complete healing occurs within 7 to 14 days.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

A skin infection may develop.

GENERAL MEASURES

- Sweating and heat make the itching worse, so try to stay cool.
- Apply cool compresses to the affected area.
- A soothing bath helps. Use Aveeno (a product made of oatmeal) or baking soda (about a half cup) per bath.
- Wash all clothing and shoes and any equipment that came in contact with the plant oils with soap and water.
- Give pets a warm, soapy bath to remove any oil from the fur.
- Consult your health care provider if rash is severe or does not improve. The diagnosis can be confirmed and, if needed, drugs may be prescribed.

MEDICATIONS

- Diphenhydramine is an oral over-the-counter antihistamine and is effective in relieving the swelling and itching of the condition. Since it can cause drowsiness, you should not take diphenhydramine if you will be operating machinery or driving a vehicle.
- You may use calamine lotion to relieve the itching.
- Your health care provider may prescribe topical or oral steroid drugs for severe symptoms.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

- The rash is on your face or genital area.
- Symptoms include fever.
- Symptoms include considerable swelling or massive blisters.
- Conditions worsen after self-treatment.

Student Health Center



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This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.