

**What is poison ivy?**

Poison ivy is a "contact dermatitis," or a skin rash with blisters. It is caused by an allergic reaction to the oily substance urushiol, or sap, in the leaves, stalks, roots, flowers, and berries of the poison-ivy plant.

**Who gets poison ivy?**

Anyone. Contact with poison ivy is one of the most frequent causes of skin rash in children during the spring, summer and fall. The oils of these plants can cause a reaction in over 50% of people.

**What are the symptoms of poison ivy?**

Symptoms usually appear within 1-3 days of exposure, but may appear as long as 3 weeks later. Redness and extreme itching are the first. Severe itching, redness, and swelling are followed by blisters. The rash is often in the pattern of streaks or patches consistent with where the plant touched the skin. The worst stage of the rash is usually four to seven days after exposure. It may last for one to two weeks. Reactions may vary from very mild to very severe, in highly sensitive individuals, sometimes even requiring hospitalization.

**How is poison ivy spread?**

Any body part may be affected as long as it comes in direct contact with the oil of the plant or with smoke from burning poison ivy. Rubbing or scratching the skin, when the oil is still on it, can spread the oil from one part of the body to another. Contact with urushiol can occur in three ways:

- 1) Direct contact – touching the sap of the toxic plant,
- 2) Indirect contact – touching something on which urushiol is present. The oil can stick to the fur of animals, to garden tools or sports equipment, or to any objects that have come into contact with it.
- 3) Airborne contact – burning poison plants puts urushiol particles into the air.

It is not spread by the fluid of the blisters, therefore is not contagious person-to-person, unless the oil remains on the skin and is touched by another person.

**What is the treatment for poison ivy?**

Treatment does not cure poison ivy; it just eases the discomfort. Without treatment, a mild case will resolve in approximately 2 weeks. It is important to keep your hands away from eyes, mouth and face. Though it is difficult, try not to scratch. This may cause infection. Cool compresses, baking soda or oatmeal (Aveeno) soaks may offer some relief. Calamine lotion may help (topical Benadryl may make the rash worse). Antihistamines (Benadryl oral) may relieve the itching at night to help you sleep. If your doctor prescribes medications, be sure to follow the instructions. A medicine called corticosteroid may be prescribed for more serious cases of rash with swelling (over the counter corticosteroids are too weak to be effective). In cases of severe or extensive rash, especially around the face or genitals, your doctor may prescribe oral medicine.

**Call immediately for emergency medical assistance if:**

The patient begins to experience a severe allergic reaction such as:

- swelling of the airway (throat, tongue, mouth or nose)
- difficulty breathing or swallowing
- weakness
- dizziness
- bluish lips or mouth
- unconsciousness
- history of having experienced a severe reaction to poison ivy from a past exposure
- cough following exposure to the smoke of burning poison ivy plants

**Notify your physician if any of the following happens:**

- The itching is severe and cannot be controlled
- The rash affects the face, lips, eyes or genitals
- You develop a fever over 100° F. orally

- The rash or blisters show signs of infection, such as pus, yellow fluid leaking from blisters, odor or increased tenderness.
- The prescribed treatments and medicines do not bring relief within a few days.

**Can a person get poison ivy again?**

Yes, anytime exposure to the plant oil occurs.

**What can be done to prevent the spread of poison ivy?**

Learn to identify these plants and teach your children to identify them as soon as they are able. Teach them to avoid contact with the plants or smoke caused by burning them. Over-the-counter creams, such as Ivy Block or Stoko Gard Outdoor Cream, applied at least 15 minutes before exposure, form a barrier against the plant's sap. If you plan to be in an area where poison ivy grows, wear long sleeves and long pants. Wear vinyl gloves (urushiol can soak through rubber). Rinse off tools after using them. Wash your clothing and shoes and use care not to transfer the urushiol to rugs or furniture. Wash any body surfaces that have had contact with the poison ivy as soon as possible (preferably within 5-10 minutes after exposure). Be sure to clean under your fingernails because oil can be spread from scratching. Do not touch the skin or clothing of the exposed person with your bare hands. Bathe animals that may have been exposed.