

Poison Oak

Poison Oak is an extremely common plant in Northern California and is related to poison ivy and sumac. It is a potential cause of serious "contact" dermatitis to over 50% of the population who are allergic to it. It may grow as a shrub or vine, and is found especially near rivers, streams, and lakes. It is only rarely found at elevations above 5,000 feet. The rash is caused by an allergic reaction to the plant's resin, urushiol. The resin (oil) is found on the roots, stems, leaves, and fruit and can be transferred by smoke, pets, clothing, etc. It may remain active for up to one year. One develops the rash either from touching the plant directly, or from touching an object that has some of the plant resin on it. If the resin is on one's hands, it may spread when other parts of the body are touched. However, it is not contagious once the resin has been washed off.

We're not born sensitive to poison oak; we acquire sensitivity through exposure. The first exposure generally occurs in childhood, causing little or no reaction. However, it sets in motion the immunologic machinery called "contact sensitization." On the next exposure-perhaps a year or more later-a horrendous rash may appear after a brush with poison oak.

The rash may begin anywhere from six hours to six days after exposure. If not treated, it will usually fade in one to three weeks. The rash is often worse on areas of the body where the skin is "thin" especially the face and genitals.

Prevention centers mainly around knowing what the poison oak plant looks like and avoiding it. It has slightly glossy green leaves that grow in groups of three. The leaves may turn colors in the fall. It may develop clusters of green or white berries. Protective clothing should be worn. Ivy Shield, IvyBlock, and Stokogard Outdoor Crème are creams that reportedly will prevent poison oak if rubbed on the skin from 4 to 8 hours before exposure.

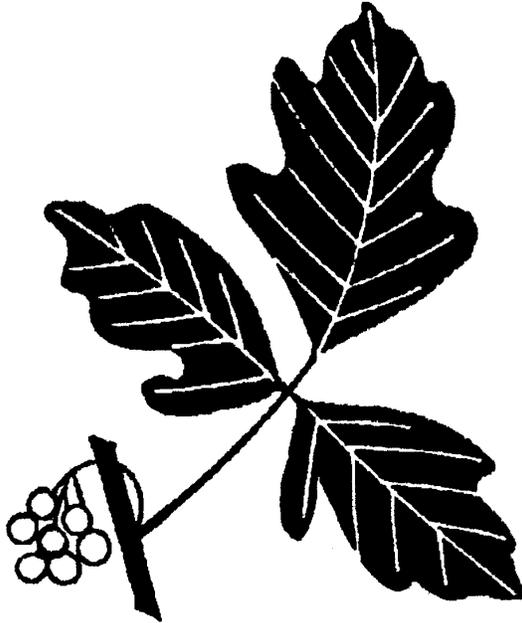
After any possible poison oak exposure, it's important to bathe or shower as soon as possible, and to wash all clothing and other objects that may have touched the plant in hot water. Regular soap and water or rubbing alcohol (isopropanol) may remove the oil if you wash within 15-30minutes after exposure. "Technu Oak and Ivy Cleaner", available at REI and other camping stores, can remove the resin from skin even several hours after exposure. Hopefully, washing with this product after any possible exposures to poison oak will prevent the rash from starting.

Treatment:

- 1) Plain calamine lotion can temporarily reduce the itching..
- 2) Cool soda baths (one cup baking soda per tub) or Aveeno oatmeal baths may also give relief.
- 3) Antihistamines given by mouth are also quite effective in reducing itch. These include over the counter medications such as Benadryl or Chlortrimeton as well as prescription drugs.
- 4) Mild rashes can be treated with a cortisone cream or lotion, over-the-counter, or as prescribed by your doctor.
- 5) For more severe cases, an oral cortisone, usually Prednisone, is prescribed for several days. It's important to follow the directions exactly, because if the drug is stopped too soon, the rash may reappear.
- 6) If blisters and oozing are present, your physician may recommend moist compresses with Burrow's solution. This is done as follows:
 - a) Prepare Burow's solution by dissolving one packet of Domeboro Powder in a pint of cool tap water.

- b) Soak clean cloths (old bed sheets, cloth diapers, gauze, etc.) in the solution.
- c) Wring out the cloth until it no longer drips.
- d) Apply the cloth to the affected area.
- e) Change and re-soak the compresses every three or four minutes for 20 to 60 minutes.
- f) Repeat this process three to six times a day until the lesions are dry.

Hyposensitization (i.e. "shots" or medicine to make one immune to poison oak) were available at one time but were taken off the market when they were found not to work. However, present research in this area is ongoing and may someday produce an effective vaccine to prevent poison oak.



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Remember: "Leaves of three, quickly flee;
Berries white, poisonous sight!"



Poison Ivy