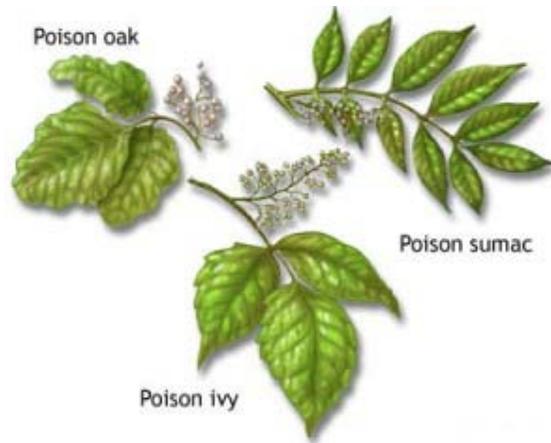


POISON IVY

Learning what poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac look like is the best way to protect yourself, your family and your pets from coming in contact with the plant and developing a rash. Summer months are a time when poison ivy is extremely common and with increased time spent outdoors, your chances of coming in contact with one of these plants is greater as well.

Poison ivy is extremely common and grows as a vine on trees, rock walls, or buildings. If these supports are not nearby, poison ivy can still grow as a small bush or shrub. Poison ivy has a number of relatives, which can cause an identical rash on sensitive persons. This group includes poison oak and poison sumac.



What Does Poison Ivy Look Like?

A typical poison ivy leaf is made up of three leaflets, joined at a common stalk. The leaflets are often colored slightly reddish (but not always) at the stem. The leaflets may have toothed edges (as in poison oak) or may be smooth. Grape-like clumps of greenish, then white berries appear in mid-summer; and in fall the leaves turn an orange-yellow or red.

How Does Poison Ivy Cause a Rash?

The rash occurs after a person who is allergic to poison ivy gets Urushiol (oo-roo-she-all) oil, found in the sap from the plant, on the skin. The plant must be damaged (bruised or cut) before sap can escape, so touching an undamaged plant will usually not cause a rash. Reactions to the sap can vary greatly and often times differ from person to person. Damaging any part of the plant, such as brush cutting (including the vine and roots), any time of year will release enough sap to cause problems. Smoke from burning the plant can also cause a rash or worse reactions if it is inhaled. Pets, tools, and clothing can carry the sap to the skin, even for weeks. Dead plants and dry roots will hold the oil for up to five years.

How Can the Rash be Prevented?

Knowledge and avoidance of the plant is critical. Appropriate clothing is the best prevention if you must work around poison ivy. Some “barrier creams” can be effective in preventing or slowing the absorption of the ivy sap into the skin, but washing with soap and water is still required as soon as practical after exposure. Once the sap gets on the skin it soaks in quickly. Washing with soap and cool water within 10 or 20 minutes of exposure may prevent the rash. If this is not possible, washing within an hour of exposure can reduce the seriousness of the rash. The rash may start as early as six hours or as much as two weeks after exposure. Clothing that has been in contact with the sap should be carefully handled and washed before wearing again. Be sure to wash clothing which has come in contact with poison ivy separately from regular clothing to avoid cross-contamination.

How Can the Rash be Healed?

There is no specific treatment to “heal” the rash, however, there are some important factors to remember. The rash cannot be spread by scratching or by the blister fluid and usually heals within two or three weeks. Although broken blisters will not further spread the rash, they can become infected like any other open wound and should be well cared-for. The rash will itch and swell more in hot temperatures, so cool baths or showers will be more comfortable. Minor itching, pain, oozing, and swelling can be relieved with over-the-counter anti-itch treatments that contain zinc acetate, diphenhydramine HCl, menthol zinc oxide, or hydrocortisone. In severe cases, consult your physician for further recommendations.