

Tips to Prevent, Treat Poison Ivy

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

Each year, an estimated 25 million to 40 million people in the United States 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 people, this itchy rash will appear one or two days after they have been exposed to the plant, and condition can last anywhere from 10 days to three weeks.

"The allergic reaction from poison ivy is caused by oil in the plant," said Lisa Hammer, M.D., a pediatrician at the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. "The reaction usually starts with redness and swelling of the skin, which is then followed by either bumps or blisters."

More than 50 percent of people are sensitive to this oil -- a colorless, odorless resin called urushiol -- contained in the leaves of poison ivy.

To take the "itch" out of summer for both kids and adults, Hammer offers tips to help treat poison ivy and advice on how to avoid contact with the three leaves of this poison plant.

- Wash the area. "If you come into contact with poison ivy, the best advice is to wash your skin as quickly as possible with soap and cold, running water," Hammer said. Do this within minutes of coming into contact with the plant to prevent the oil from absorbing into the skin. Also, avoid vigorously scrubbing the area or using hot water since this may further open pores or cause more irritation to the skin.
- Cool off. "People with poison ivy tend to find relief from cool baths or cool compresses," Hammer said. She also recommends massaging the affected area with an ice cube for relief. However, don't forget to let the area air dry after soaking or massaging it with an ice cube. Allowing it to air dry will reduce itching and oozing of blisters.
- Use oral or topical antihistamines. Oral antihistamines such as Benadryl will help to reduce the itch of poison ivy. Hammer also recommends the use of topical creams such as calamine lotion to ease itching.
- 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 that may still be on these items.
 - Give Fido a bath. The rash caused by poison ivy can spread if there are oils from the plant on your pet's fur, or even on other items around the yard such as gardening tools. Hammer recommends thoroughly washing both pets and other items that may have come into contact with poison ivy to remove the oils.
 - Stop the rash from spreading to others. The fluid from the sores caused by poison ivy is not contagious. Hammer said that the rash caused by poison ivy will only spread to other areas of the body if the oil from the plant is still on your skin. And the rash will only spread to another person if you have oil on your hand and touch the individual. Once the oil has been removed from your skin, it is no longer possible to spread the rash to other areas of your body.

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- If the reaction is severe, seek medical attention. Most cases of poison ivy can be handled at home. In rare cases, however, poison ivy can be extremely serious or even fatal. "Occasionally, poison ivy can become a more severe situation 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," Hammer said.

"In general, the best advice is to try to prevent coming into contact with poison ivy," Hammer said. "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."

For more information, visit these Web sites:

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

KidsHealth -- Poison ivy:
http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/skin/poison_ivy.html

Medline Plus --Poison ivy, oak and sumac rash:
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000027.htm>