

# Poison Ivy

## What is Poison Ivy?

Poison ivy is a plant that can cause an itchy, red skin rash (dermatitis). When people have this rash, they often say, "I have poison ivy." Poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac plants all contain a compound called urushiol, which is a light, colorless oil that is found on the fruit, leaves, stem, root, and sap of the plant.

There are several ways that you can be exposed to urushiol:

- By touching the sap or rubbing against the leaves of the toxic plant at any time of year
- By touching something that has urushiol on it, such as animal fur or garden tools
- By breathing in smoke when toxic plants are burned
- Ginkgo fruit and the skin of mangoes also contain urushiol and can produce symptoms similar to poison ivy rash

## What does poison ivy look like?

Poison ivy and poison oak have 3 leaves coming off a single stem. Hence the saying: "leaves of 3, let them be." The leaves start out green, but they can turn red or brown. Even dead plants can cause the rash. See pictures: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/10655-poison-plants-poison-ivy--poison-oak--poison-sumac>

## Poison ivy signs and symptoms

After contact with urushiol, approximately 50 percent of people develop signs and symptoms of poison ivy rash. The symptoms and severity differ from person to person. The most common signs and symptoms of poison ivy dermatitis are:

- Intense itching
- Skin swelling
- Skin redness

These symptoms usually develop within four hours to four days after exposure to the urushiol. After the initial symptoms, you may develop

fluid-filled blisters in a line or streak-like pattern. Blisters are little bubbles of skin that are filled with fluid. They can show up in different places at different times. But that does not mean that the rash is spreading. Touching the blisters or the fluid inside the blisters will not spread the rash. Poison ivy dermatitis is not contagious and cannot be passed from person to person. However, urushiol can be carried under fingernails and on clothes; if another person comes in contact with the urushiol, they can develop poison ivy rash.

The symptoms are worse within 1 to 14 days after touching the plant, but can develop up to 21 days later if you have never been exposed to urushiol before.

## Poison ivy treatment

Poison ivy dermatitis (rash) usually resolves within one to three weeks without treatment. Remove any contaminated clothing and gently wash (do not scrub or rub) your skin and under the fingernails with mild soap and water as soon as possible. Washing within 10 minutes after exposure can reduce the likelihood and severity of symptoms. Washing of contaminated pets will prevent re-exposure as well.

## What can I do to relieve the itching and discomfort?

- Avoid scratching (that makes the itch worse)
- Try putting a cold, wet cloth; or paper towels on your rash.
- Apply Calamine Lotion®, Caladryl® or Ivarest®. These are examples of astringent, protecting, and soothing agents.
- If your blisters have started to pop, use skin products that have aluminum acetate in them (over-the-counter (OTC) examples include Burrow's Solution and Domeboro®)
- Any products that contain Pramoxine ex. Aveeno® anti-itch.

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## Antihistamines

Antihistamines do not help to relieve itching caused by poison ivy dermatitis. Some antihistamines make you sleepy while others do not. The ones that make you sleepy (eg, diphenhydramine *brand name Benadryl*®) can help you ignore the itch when sleeping.

## Some creams & lotions make your rash worse

The products listed below sometimes make your skin more itchy or irritated:

- Antihistamine creams or lotions
- Numbing products that have benzocaine
- Antibiotic ointments with neomycin or bacitracin

## When should I contact Health & Wellness?

- Your rash is severe
- Most of your body is affected
- Your face or genitals are affected
- You have a lot of swelling
- You are not sure that you have poison ivy
- Your rash oozes pus or other signs of being infected
- Your rash does not get better after 2-3 weeks

If you have a very bad rash, your provider can prescribe steroid medicines. These medicines can reduce swelling and relieve itching. Steroids come in creams, ointments, and pills. Your provider will discuss what form you should use.

Steroid creams and ointments are also sold without a prescription. But non-prescription versions are not usually strong enough to help with poison ivy.

## How do I keep from getting poison ivy again?

- Wear protective clothing, including long sleeves and pants when working in areas

where toxic plants may be found. Keep in mind that the resin and oils from the toxic plants can be carried on clothing, pets, and under fingernails.

- Wear heavy-duty vinyl gloves when doing yard work or gardening. The oils from toxic plants can seep through latex or rubber gloves.
- After coming in contact with poison ivy, remove any contaminated clothing and gently wash (do not scrub or rub) your skin and under the fingernails with mild soap and water as soon as possible. Washing within 10 minutes after exposure can reduce the likelihood and severity of symptoms; washing the skin after 10 minutes of exposure may not help.
- Creams and ointments that create a barrier between the skin and the urushiol oil may be effective for people who are frequently exposed to poison ivy. Bentoquatam (Ivy Block®) is one type of barrier cream that may prevent poison ivy dermatitis. It must be reapplied every four hours and it leaves a clay residue on the skin.
- Avoid burning poisonous vegetation, which can disperse plant particles in the smoke, irritate the skin, and cause poison ivy dermatitis.

Additional websites with pictures of the plant and typical poison ivy rash:

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/poison-ivy/DS00774>

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants/>

### Source:

<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/poison-ivy-beyond-the-basics>

**Contact a Health & Wellness Health Resource Nurse at (603) 862-2856**  
**For After Hours Care please call (603) 862-9355 (WELL)**



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