

## POISON IVY

**What is it?** Poison ivy is a plant. It has three bright green leaves on each stem that turn red in the autumn. Poison ivy can cause an itchy, uncomfortable rash on your skin. Touching plants like poison oak and poison sumac can cause the same kind of rash. Poison ivy grows as a shrub or vine in woods, fields, and areas of thick underbrush.

**What causes a poison ivy rash?** A poison ivy rash is caused when the oil of the plant soaks into your skin. You may get a rash from touching:

- Pets that have poison ivy oil on their fur. They can spread it to your skin and inside your car and house.
- Any part of a poison ivy plant. This includes the leaves, stem, vine, roots, or its flowers and berries.
- Clothing, shoes, camping or sports equipment, or outdoor tools that have poison ivy oil on them.
- Touching another person's skin or clothes that are covered with the plant oil.

**What are the signs and symptoms?** A red, swollen, itchy rash with blisters usually develops 12 to 72 hours after exposure to the oil. The rash may also form hours sooner or days later than this. It may appear in thick patches or as thin lines where the edge of the plant rubbed against your skin. When the blisters break, they leak clear, yellowish liquid. Then the rash turns crusty and scaly. Your skin may break out all at once or over a period of days. The first 5 days of a poison ivy rash are usually the most uncomfortable. Your rash should go away in 1 to 4 weeks.

**Can I spread a poison ivy rash by scratching or touching it?**

No. Some people think their rash is spreading because they continue to get new rashes over a number of days. "New" rashes actually appear because your skin is thicker in some places and thinner in other places. Poison ivy oil soaks into your skin within minutes. Areas covered by thinner skin break out in a rash first. For example, your face, neck, or forearms may break out in a rash before the palms of your hands do. This is because the skin on your palms is thicker, and it takes a longer time for the oil to cause a rash. The liquid inside your blisters is not poison ivy oil, so it will not cause your rash to spread. A poison ivy rash can be spread only if you scratch your skin while it still has oil on it. If the oil collects under your fingernails, you can spread it by scratching other skin areas.

**What can I do if I have been exposed to poison ivy?** Rinse your skin with cool water first. Then wash with soap or a gentle cleansing lotion. Rinse your skin well. Do not use hot water because it may cause the oil to spread on your skin. You may also put rubbing alcohol or a solution of half alcohol and half water on your skin. These may cause your rash to be less severe when it breaks out on your skin.

**How can I take care of my rash?**

- **Keep your rash clean.** Wash with soap and water. Gently pat it dry with a clean towel.
- **Try not to scratch or rub your rash.** This can cause your skin to become infected.
- **Put a compress on your rash to decrease itching and discomfort.** Dip a clean washcloth in cool water or Burow's solution. Wring it out and place it on your rash. Leave the washcloth on your skin for 15 minutes. Do this at least 3 times per day. Follow package instructions carefully when using Burow's solution.
- **Take a bath.** If your rash is too large for a compress, bathe in lukewarm water. Hot water may cause your itching to increase. You may also use colloidal oatmeal in the water to help soothe your skin.
- **Call your doctor** if your rash covers a large body area, or if it is on your face near your eyes. You may need to take medicine to decrease swelling and discomfort. Your doctor may also give you creams or ointments that you cannot get without a prescription. If you are having trouble breathing, this is an emergency. Call 911 or "0" (operator) immediately.

**If I am out in areas where poison ivy grows, how can I prevent a poison ivy rash?**

- Do not touch plants that look like poison ivy.
- Wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and gloves.
- Put on skin block to protect your skin from poison ivy oil. You can buy a lotion like IvyBlock™ (Bentoquatam) at grocery or drug stores without a prescription.
- Wash your clothes with warm, soapy water when you return home. Wash them separately from other clothes. Rinse the washing machine well after you take the clothes out. Scrub boots and shoes with warm, soapy water. Poison ivy oil is long-lasting and sticky. It can stay on clothing and other items, causing new rashes even years later.
- Dry clean items and clothing that you cannot wash in water.
- Use warm water and shampoo on your pet's fur. This will prevent the spread of oil to your skin, car, and home.
- Wear long sleeves, long pants, and gloves while washing pets or any items that may have oil on them.
- Never burn poison ivy plants. This can spread the oil through the air. If you breathe the oil into your lungs, you could have swelling and serious breathing problems. Oil that clings to the fire ash can land on your skin and cause a rash.
- Remove poison ivy plants from your yard. Wear protective clothing, such as long pants, sleeves, heavy gloves, and closed-toe shoes. If you are very sensitive to poison ivy, have someone else remove the plant for you. Pull the plant out by the root. Place it in a plastic bag and seal the bag tightly. Do not touch anyone or anything after you pull out the poison ivy. Wash all clothing items immediately with warm, soapy water.