

Weeding Out Myths About Poison Ivy

Two days after a picnic, you notice a blistery rash. In a few days it itches - you have



poison ivy. Actually, the offending agent isn't a poison at all -- it is a resin called urushiol (oo-Roo-Sheol). This antigen or allergy-inducing substance, is found in the sap of poison ivy and its relatives, poison oak and sumac.

Common Fallacies

- Poison ivy grows only in the spring and summer

False. Poison ivy is easier to spot in May and June because of its small green flowers, but the plant also grows in early fall. And the resin can remain on the surface of dead plants in winter as well.

- Poison ivy, oak, and sumac belong to the ivy and oak families.

False. All three are in the cashew nut family.

- You are born with a sensitivity to poison ivy.

False. Nobody is sensitive to urushiol at birth. This allergy rarely manifests itself the first time the body is exposed to the antigen. But subsequent exposures might trigger a reaction, causing a lifelong allergy.

- Scrubbing with soap and water after exposure is important.

True. Wash exposed areas well with a gentle soap. Wash clothes and clean your shoes or boots with detergent or alcohol to remove the resin. Your pet's fur and your tools may also pick up the resin.



- Perspiration spreads poison ivy.

False. Perspiration won't spread the rash, if the resin (urushiol) has been washed off.

- Hot showers spread poison ivy.

False. Cool showers sooth an itch longer since hot water rushes blood to the affected area and gives only temporary relief.

- Broken blisters are contagious.

False. The liquid inside a blister is your body's defensive response. Do not puncture the blisters.

How To Destroy the Plants

For the allergy to develop, the resin (urushiol) from the plant must reach your skin. Chopping down or burning the plants aerosolizes their toxins, and inhaling these chemicals can cause a serious lung reaction. To pull out plants safely, wear disposable plastic (not rubber or cloth) gloves. Uprooted plants should be buried or put into plastic bags, not burned. Chemical weed killers are preferred because pulling up plants only stimulates their spread.



Preventing the Rash

Researchers are developing a cream that can be applied before you venture into areas where poison ivy and its relatives grow.



For now, learn to avoid these plants. Poison ivy grows east of the Rockies; its saggy leaves of rich green with reddish tints cluster in groups of three. Greenish-white berries help identify the plant in early spring, late fall, and winter. Poison oak flourishes in the western states, with leaves growing in three's - dark green on top and light underneath. Poison sumac thrives in swamplands and resembles a small tree. Its leaflets range from 7 to 13 in number.

It is always best to wash with soap and water soon after working in brushy areas.

Treatment

If you do break out, antihistamine tablets relieve itching in mild cases. A wet compress of Domeboro solution soothes the itching and dries the moist areas. Prame-Gel or Sarna lotion can also be applied to soothe the itching. Hydrocortisone cream applied to affected areas (avoid the eyes) is often helpful. All of these products are available as over-the-counter items in a drugstore. If the rash is severe, or covers large areas of your body, or involves your face or eyelids, see your health care practitioner immediately; you may be given oral or injectable corticosteroids which can shorten the course and make you more comfortable.