



Poison Ivy: What You Need to Know

How We Get It

Poison ivy seems to grow everywhere, even along city sidewalks! More than half of us eventually become sensitive to it. As a result, most of us know to look out for vines or shrubs with three-leaf clusters. Poison oak and sumac grow in the South, but all three plants produce the same chemical (urushiol) and cause the same rash (rhus dermatitis).

Besides direct contact, we can also get the rash from a pet, piece of clothing, or garden equipment that has been exposed. Humans are not contagious – even if we get blisters. Even so, we don't advise popping them. The rash can occur anywhere from a few hours to several days after exposure. This is because the chemical is absorbed at different rates in different parts of the body. The face is usually the first to show signs.

Treatment

Without therapy, poison ivy can drag on for three weeks or more. If you think you've been exposed, wash the area within a few minutes! The chemical penetrates the skin quickly. If there are just a few spots of redness without much oozing, one can try to manage by keeping the area clean and dry and applying hydrocortisone 1% creme, as well as soaking with Aveeno, Burrow's solution, or baking soda. Don't try Chlorox or calamine lotions (they contain substances that make the rash worse in many people-- but cool water can give some relief too.

If the rash is near the eyes, or significant swelling of the face, genitals, etc occur, then an appointment may be needed. More potent cream as well as prednisone will likely be recommended.

Prevention

Be careful about handling your pet if Fluffy or Fido have been running through the bushes. When coming in from outdoor areas where exposure may have taken place, Technu cleansing lotion or Octagon soap used in the shower work well.

Remember to do a good tick check if you have developed a poison ivy rash. Ticks tend to hang out in the same area, and a bad case of poison ivy can make it harder to diagnose a Lyme rash.