

Poison Oak

Rhus dermatitis is a skin rash caused by direct contact with the irritating oil of poison oak (found on the West Coast) and poison ivy (found on the East Coast) plants. It is found on all parts of the plant, including the roots, sap, leaves, fruit, and stems, and even the smoke emitting from the plant if it is burned. Ginkgo fruit and mango skin also contain this irritating oil and can produce similar symptoms. Touching clothing, pets, or other objects with the oil on it can also cause the rash.

"Leaves of three, let them be" is a phrase often used to identify plants that cause poison oak dermatitis. Generally, these plants have three leaflets per leaf with flowering branches on a single stem. It is not always possible to identify the plant by the leaves alone since the appearance can vary depending upon the season, growth cycle, region, and climate.

Symptoms

The symptoms usually present within five days after contact, but it is possible for it to take up to three weeks. Intense itching, swelling, redness, and blisters may appear. The rash can occur at different times; blisters can develop on the arms several days after blisters on the hands developed. This does not mean that the reaction is spreading from one area of the body to the other. Contact with the rash or the fluid that leaks from blisters does not spread the rash to other parts of the skin or to another person. However, oil from the plant left on clothes, pets, or under the fingernails, can transfer to the skin.

Treatment

After exposure, to remove the oils from the skin, take a hot shower once with either regular dish soap or special cleansers such as as Tecnu®, which can be found at many drugstores or outdoor equipment stores. Wash your clothes and any other contaminated items (backpack, shoes, etc.) with regular laundry detergent.

The rash usually resolves within one to three weeks. Treatment is directed toward decreasing the itching, as scratching can increase the risk of infection. This can include:

- Cool, wet compresses or lukewarm oatmeal baths
- Calamine lotion
- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl)® 25-50 mg antihistamine at bedtime may help to sedate you and keep you from scratching overnight.
- Hydrocortisone 1% ointment 2-3 times per day can also help decrease the inflammation and itching of the rash.
- For a facial rash or a more extensive outbreak, see a health care provider for evaluation as oral steroids or higher strength prescription topical steroids may be a treatment option that can hasten the resolution of symptoms

Prevention

Learn to recognize poison oak and avoid contact when possible. Since poison oak can be difficult to identify, stay on trails at all times. Wear protective clothing, such as long pants and long sleeved shirt. Contaminated clothing can be made harmless by washing with soap or detergent, or by dry cleaning. Don't forget your shoes, belts, backpacks, scarf, etc. Special barrier creams are available at outdoor equipment stores that may protect you prior to exposure.

For an appointment visit www.uhs.berkeley.edu or call **510-642-2000**
Clinic Nurse **510-643-7197** for advice