

POISON OAK

Poison Oak is a skin rash caused by the irritating oil of the poison oak plant. Most cases are due to direct contact with the plant but some cases are caused by touching clothing, pets or implements contaminated with the plant oil.

The Symptoms

The symptoms appear one to ten days after contact. The rash appears first in the areas exposed to the greatest concentration of oil. Burning and itching of the skin appear and then a rash. Swelling, blisters, and weeping of blisters may follow. Symptoms usually disappear within a few weeks without harmful effects, although there is a possibility that the blisters and scratching may lead to infection.

Once the oil is washed off the skin, poison oak cannot be transferred from one part of the body to another, nor from person to person. However, it can be spread by any oil that is left on clothes, shoes, backpacks, pets, etc.

Treatment

Treatment is directed toward decreasing the itching, as scratching increase the risk of infection. Most over-the-counter remedies sold for poison oak contain anti-histamines, anesthetics, or cortisone which help ease the symptoms until the rash subsides. In severe cases, or if facial or genital areas are involved, oral cortisone therapy may be beneficial.

Safe Temporary Relief

- **Cool wet compresses**, such as a starch solution of colloidal oatmeal. *Aveeno*® can be very soothing. Soak a clean cloth and place it on the affected area. *Keep the dressing wet.* If a large area is affected, oatmeal baths may be helpful.
- **Calamine lotion** may be applied to the affected area. Available at most drug stores, it is economical and convenient to use, and now is available as a clear cream.
- **Diphenhydramine (Benadryl)**® 25mg antihistamine. 1 or 2 capsules may be taken at bedtime to help with itching. It may also be used every 4-6 hours during the day but does cause severe drowsiness which may hamper performance. Other over-the counter antihistamines include *Claritin*® (non-sedating).
- **Hydrocortisone 1% cream or lotion**, now available over-the-counter, helps decrease the inflammation and itching of the rash. It can be applied to involved areas 2-3 times per day.

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. Take a cool or lukewarm bath or shower, using plenty of soap, as soon as possible after exposure. 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). *Stokogard*® cream and *TecnuArmor*®, applied prior to poison oak exposure, may prevent the rash (available through outdoor equipment stores like REI for approximately \$6-also available as a soap for post-exposure use).

Check our website: www.uhs.berkeley.edu to learn more about this medical concern or others.

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