

# Poison Oak, My Third "Bugaboo" of Summer

Growing up in Los Gatos my brother and I would be forever out in the local hills and into the poison oak. Our mother used to say 'the boys just have to walk by poison oak and they get it'. Needless to say I've had my fair share of personal experience with this plant.



Poison oak is part of a family of plants which has an oily, irritating sap called urushiol. The other plants in this family are poison ivy and poison sumac and they do not grow here in California. Atlantic poison oak is closely related to our Pacific poison oak, but is only found on the East coast. Pacific poison oak can be found from Canada to Baja California. It is a rather pretty looking plant with colors ranging from glistening green to sharp deep reds. It is a shrub, but when growing next to trees it will grow up the tree like a vine. For those new to California or people who don't frequent the outdoors, remember the age old saying: "leaves of three leave it be." The leaves grow in groups of three and this is the most distinguishing characteristic of the plant.

All parts of the plant contain urushiol, not just the leaves. The branches and roots have the ability to cause the allergic reaction as well. The oily sap is a thick milk colored oil, when it is exposed to the air it quickly turns black. Burning poison oak is extremely dangerous. The smoke from the burning plants can cause a severe reaction in the lungs with the possibility of respiratory shut down and death. The allergic contact dermatitis happens from direct contact with the plant or indirect contact such as gardening tools, family pet that has gone into the poison oak, or clothing that was worn and came into contact with the plant. This includes your shoes! The poison oak oil attaches to the skin within 5 minutes to two hours after exposure. It is estimated that more than 75% of the population is allergic to urushiol oil.



The rash is red and itchy to begin with. The rash then blisters up with clear to yellow fluid in the blisters. These blisters then break open and ooze. The rash may be warm to the touch, some individuals feel pain or tenderness around the rash. Many times the pattern of the rash is one of streaks or patches where the oils contacted the skin. Swelling from the reaction is very common.

What are you to do after you have been exposed to poison oak?

1) Get into the shower as soon as possible after exposure. Use soap and warm water to cleanse the areas that may have come in contact with the urushiol oil. After the oils have bound to the skin soap and water will not be of benefit, but it is still the first thing to do. There are several products that claim to help remove the poison oak oils from the skin, Zanfel and Tecnu Extreme are two of these products. The products are available at most pharmacies.

2) I recommend you remove all clothing immediately upon returning home. Remember the oils on your clothing can cause symptoms, so handle the clothing and shoes with disposable gloves.

3) If you do get the rash: take cool showers, over the counter pain medication for relief of pain and itching, apply hydrocortisone, calamine or caladryl lotion to the itching areas. Oral Benadryl or Allegra may help control the itching. Benadryl does have sleepy side effect, so this medication may help you sleep at night.



4) Don't scratch! This can lead to secondary bacterial infections and possibly scarring.

5) Contact your doctor if the symptoms get worse or the rash spreads to the face, around the eyes, mouth or the genitals. These symptoms may require prescription medications.

6) Wash all gardening tools with soap and water after use near poison oak. A degreasing product gives the best results.

Myths about poison oak abound, these are few:

1) Poison oak is contagious. TRUTH: Poison oak is not contagious from person to person. It looks like it should be, but this is just an allergic reaction to urushiol oil.

2) Scratching the rash or blisters will spread the poison oak. TRUTH: Fluid from the blisters does not spread the rash nor does scratching the rash after the initial contact with the plant.

3) It is OK to handle dead, dried up poison oak. TRUTH: The oils of the plant are still active even after the plant has been killed and dried out.



4) My allergy to poison oak will get worse as I age. TRUTH: A person's sensitive changes over time and usually we become less sensitive to poison oak as we age.

The best prevention is to become aware of what poison oak looks like and avoid it at all costs.

Kjartan D. Armann, M.D.