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Poison Ivy Dermatitis

What is poison ivy?

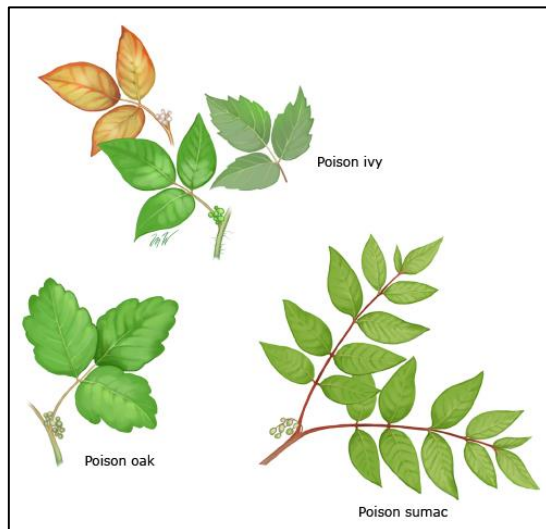
Poison ivy is a plant that can cause an itchy skin rash. When people have this rash, they often say, "I got poison ivy." The same substance that causes the poison ivy rash is also found in poison oak, poison sumac, the ginkgo fruit, cashew shells, and mango peels.

How did I get poison ivy?

You might have gotten poison ivy if you:

- Touched a poison ivy plant
- Touched something that had the plant's oils on it (such as clothing, animal fur, or garden tools)
- Were nearby when poison ivy plants were being burned

What does poison ivy look like?



Poison ivy and poison oak have 3 leaves coming off a single stem. That's why there is a saying, "leaves of 3, let them be." The leaves start out green, but they can turn red or brown. Even dead plants can cause the rash.

Poison ivy plants produce a green or off-white fruit in autumn, and in some cases, black dots form on the plants' leaves. 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.

Poison ivy, oak, and sumac plants grow in many areas across the United States. East of the Rocky Mountains, poison ivy commonly grows as a climbing vine. Eastern poison oak grows in the southeast United States. Poison sumac inhabits boggy areas in the southeastern part of the United States.

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What will happen to my rash?

Your rash should go away within 1 to 3 weeks, but it might form blisters before it does. Blisters are little bubbles of skin that are filled with fluid. They can show up in different places at different times. But that does not mean that the rash is spreading. Touching the blisters or the fluid inside the blisters will not spread the rash.

Should I see my doctor?

You should see your doctor if:

- Your rash is severe
- Most of your body is affected
- Your face or genitals are affected
- You have a lot of swelling
- You are not sure that you have poison ivy
- Your rash oozes pus or gives other signs of being infected
- Your rash does not get better after 2 to 3 weeks

How is poison ivy treated?

Poison ivy dermatitis usually resolves within one to three weeks without treatment.

Treatments that may help relieve the itching, soreness, and discomfort include:

- **Skin treatments:** For some people, adding oatmeal to a bath, applying cool wet compresses, and applying calamine lotion may help to relieve itching. Once the blisters begin weeping fluid, astringents containing aluminum acetate (Burow's solution) and Domeboro may help to relieve the rash.
- **Antihistamines:** Antihistamines do not help to relieve itching caused by poison ivy. Some antihistamines make you sleepy which can help you to ignore the itch while asleep, but patients scratch just as much with or without them.
- **Steroid creams:** Steroid creams may be helpful if they are used during the first few days after symptoms develop. Low-potency steroid creams, such as 1% hydrocortisone (available over-the-counter) are not usually helpful. A stronger prescription formula may be helpful.

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- **Steroid pills or injections:** If you develop severe symptoms or the rash covers a large area (especially on the face or genitals), your doctor may recommend steroid pills or injections to help relieve itching and swelling. Pills are usually given for 21 days, with the dosage slowly decreased over time. When pills are stopped sooner than 14 days, it is common for the rash and itching to reappear.
- **Antibiotics:** Skin infections are a potential complication of poison ivy, especially if you scratch your skin. If you develop a skin infection because of poison ivy dermatitis, you may need antibiotics to treat the infection. Do not use over-the-counter topical antibiotic creams; many bacteria are resistant to them and they are one of the chief causes of allergic contact dermatitis not caused by plants.

How do I keep from getting poison ivy again?

The best way to prevent poison ivy dermatitis is to identify and avoid the plants that cause it. These plants can irritate the skin year round, even during the winter months, and they can still cause a reaction after dying.

- Wear protective clothing, including long sleeves and pants, when working in areas where toxic plants may be found. Keep in mind that the resin and oils from the toxic plants can be carried on clothing, pets, and under fingernails.
- Wear heavy-duty vinyl gloves when doing yard work or gardening. The oils from toxic plants can seep through latex or rubber gloves.
- After coming in contact with poison ivy, remove any contaminated clothing. As soon as possible (minutes count, but you can try up to two hours later), wash under very warm or hot running water using dishwashing liquid on a damp washcloth. Wash your entire body three times, while always wiping in one direction and not back and forth. This seems to reduce irritation and help remove the oils. If you do not have rapid access to dishwashing liquid, try to use plain water and wipe your skin in the same fashion; you will at least get rid of some of the resin. Comparison of dishwashing liquid with more expensive products made for removing poison ivy oils did not show a difference in effectiveness.
- Creams and ointments that create a barrier between the skin and the urushiol oil may be somewhat effective for people who are frequently exposed to poison ivy.
- Avoid burning poisonous vegetation, which can disperse the plant particles in the smoke, irritate the skin, and cause poison ivy dermatitis.