

The Allergy & Asthma Clinic

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Newsletter

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July 2019

Enjoy the great outdoors this Summer—but protect yourself from Poison Oak!

Summer is such a great time for hiking in the Bay Area. But a bad case of poison oak can really slow you down! If you've had poison oak in the past, you may be fearful of getting it again. So, it's good to be reminded of how to spot it, and what to do if you accidentally come into contact with it.

Most people (about 85%) get a rash from contact with poison oak. Poison oak, poison ivy, and poison sumac all contain *urushiol*, an oil found within the Anacardiaceae plant family (which also includes pistachios, cashews, and mangoes). Poison Oak appears as a shrub, and has clusters of 3 leaves. The urushiol oil is absorbed quickly into the skin and triggers an immune response in allergic individuals, resulting in an itchy rash. This is a form of Allergic Contact Dermatitis. This rash can appear within hours to 3-5 days after exposure with the plant itself or by touching objects—such as gardening tools, camping equipment, pet's fur, or clothing—that came into contact with the sap of this poisonous plant. For most people, the rash lingers for 1-2 weeks, but for some it can last longer.

It is helpful to note that poison oak rashes cannot be spread from person to person. And the blister fluid does NOT contain urushiol and will not spread the rash. So don't be afraid of other household members with poison oak. The rash might *seem* to spread on your own skin, but this is actually a delayed reaction to the oil coming into contact with that area. It is very important to wash the clothing and tools that may have come into contact with the plant, as these could have residual oils on it (and that *can* cause a rash in someone else handling the clothing or tools). Worth noting, don't burn poison oak in a campfire or to clear an area of poison oak off of your property—urushiol can be inhaled into the nose, throat, and lungs, resulting in serious allergic reactions.

Here are some tips from the American Academy of Dermatology:

- **Immediately rinse your skin with lukewarm, soapy water.** If you can rinse your skin immediately after touching poison oak, you may be able to rinse off some of the oil. This helps ensure that the oil does not spread to other areas of the body and cause additional rashes.
- **Wash your clothing.** Thoroughly wash all of the clothes you were wearing when you came into contact with the poisonous plant. The oil can stick to clothing, and if it touches your skin, it can cause another rash.

- **Wash everything that may have the oil on its surface.** Besides clothing, the oil from poison oak can stick to many surfaces, including gardening tools, golf clubs, leashes and even a pet's fur. Be sure to rinse your pet's fur, and wash tools and other objects with warm, soapy water.
- **Do not scratch.** Scratching can cause an infection.
- **Leave blisters alone.** If blisters open, do not remove the overlying skin, as the skin can protect the raw wound underneath and prevent infection.
- **Take short, lukewarm baths.** To ease the itch, take short, lukewarm baths in a colloidal oatmeal preparation, which you can buy at your local drugstore. You can also take a bath and add one cup of baking soda to the running water. Taking short, cool showers may also help.
- **Consider calamine lotion or hydrocortisone cream.** Apply calamine lotion to skin that itches. If you have a mild case, a topical hydrocortisone cream or lotion may also help. (Depending on the severity and location of the rash, sometimes higher potency corticosteroid creams and even oral Prednisone are needed to help reduce the rash).
- **Apply cool compresses to the itchy skin.** You can make a cool compress by wetting a clean washcloth with cold water and wringing it out so that it does not drip. Then, apply the cool cloth to the itchy skin.
- **Consider taking antihistamine pills.** Oral antihistamines such as (Allegra, Zyrtec, Xyzal, or Benadryl) can help reduce itching. However, some antihistamines cause drowsiness so be cautious with their use.

Enjoy your summer! But if you come into contact with poison oak and find yourself with an itchy rash that doesn't respond to the above mentioned recommendations, let us know and we are here to help!

