

Poison Ivy



What is poison ivy?

Poison ivy is a plant found throughout North America. More than 50% of people are sensitive to the oil of these plants, which causes a skin rash. The poison ivy plant has a distinctive grouping of three leaves. The leaves are green and shiny in the spring and summer. By the fall, they turn a dull red. The poison ivy plant grows as a shrub or vine and is frequently found on trees or fences.

The rash is caused by exposure to the oils found in the leaf, stem, or root. The oils can be carried on clothing or pets. When the poison ivy plant is burned, the oils can be carried by the wind. This type of exposure can cause a more widely spread rash.

How long does it last?

The rash generally develops 48 hours after exposure to oils and lasts 2 weeks. Treatment helps but does not cure the rash. The sores should be dried up and no longer itchy in 10 - 14 days. In the meantime, cut your child's fingernails short and encourage him not to scratch. In severe cases, the face and eyelids may be markedly swollen.

How can I take care of my child?

- Wash the area

If you think your child has had contact with poison ivy, wash the exposed areas of skin with soap for five minutes. Take special care to clean under the fingernails. Do this as soon as possible because after one hour it is too late to prevent the oil from absorbing into the skin. Wash contaminated clothing separately several times before your child wears it again. His clothing should be laundered within one hour to make sure that all traces of oil are removed.

- Cool soaks

Soak the area with the rash in cold water or massage it with an ice cube for 20 minutes as often as necessary. Let it air dry afterwards.

- Steroid creams

If applied early, a steroid cream can reduce the itching. Your pharmacist can recommend a nonprescription 1% hydrocortisone cream. Your doctor may recommend a stronger prescription steroid cream. If itching persists, give Benadryl orally. In severe cases, steroids (such as Prednisone) may be prescribed to reduce swelling.

- Contagiousness

The fluid from the sores themselves cannot cause a rash. However, oil or sap from the poisonous plant may remain on a pet's fur or on clothes or shoes (shoelaces, too!). This oil or sap can cause a rash for about a week so be sure to wash it off clothes or pets with soap and water.

How can I help prevent the rash?

Learn to recognize these plants. To be safe, avoid all plants with three large green leaves on each stem. Another clue is shiny black spots on damaged leaves. Everyone should wear long pants or socks when walking through woods that may contain poison ivy. You may want to use a barrier skin cream, such as IvyBlock, which is specifically made for this purpose.

When should I call the office?

- The itching becomes severe, even with treatment.
- The child has severe facial swelling, especially of the eyes or lips.
- The child has difficulty breathing or swallowing.
- The skin looks infected (you see pus or soft yellow scabs) or rash lasts longer than 2 weeks.

For More Information

<http://poison-ivy.org/>