

# Poison Ivy, Oak, & Sumac Fact Sheet

HS04-064D (06-21)

**E**mployers and employees need to take precautions when working in and around wooded areas, heavy foliage, and along riverbanks where poison ivy, oak, and sumac plants typically grow. According to the [American Skin Association](#), about 85% of the population are allergic to these poisonous plants, and about 10% to 15% are highly allergic.<sup>1</sup>

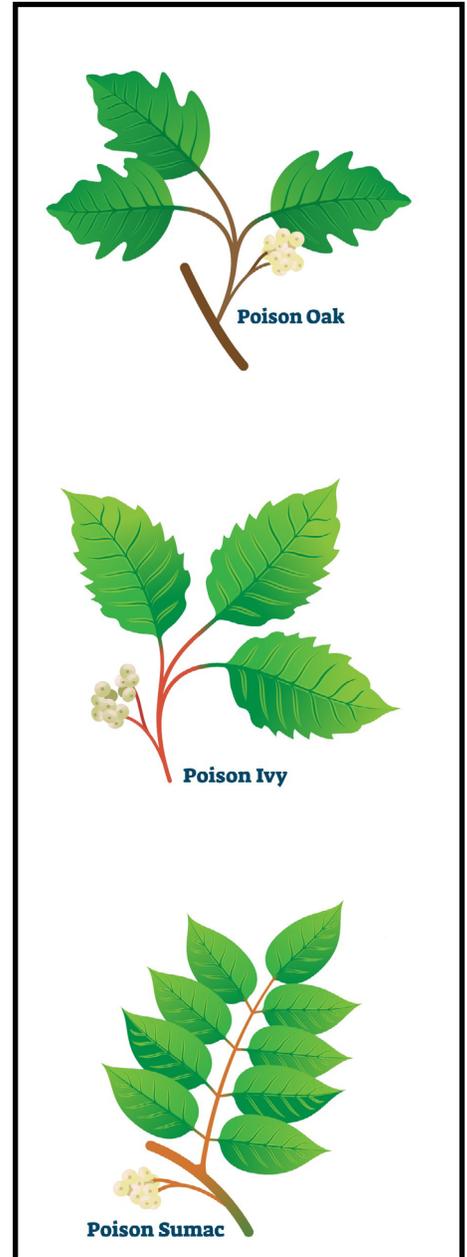
The sap of poison ivy, oak, and sumac contains a toxin called [urushiol oil](#). It only takes small amounts of this chemical to cause itching, a rash, and blisters. The urushiol oil is inside the plant, so brushing against an intact plant usually does not cause an allergic reaction. Undamaged plants, however, are rare.

Urushiol – from the Japanese word *urushi* meaning lacquer -- sticks to most things, including tools, shoes, clothes, and pets. Touching the stems, roots, or leaves of damaged plants can transfer the sticky substance to the skin, creating a reaction known as [contact dermatitis](#).

## Avoiding Exposure

Prevention is the best cure for poison ivy, oak, and sumac. These steps can help keep employees safe:

- Wear long pants, long sleeves, boots, and gloves for protection when working in wooded areas, heavy foliage, and along riverbeds.
- Use barrier skin creams that contain [bentoquatam](#). Wash off the cream and reapply it twice daily. Consult a physician before use.
- Rid worksites of poison ivy, oak, and sumac by spraying the plants with the herbicide, [glyphosate](#), according to label directions. The best time to apply the herbicide is May through July, when poison ivy, oak, and sumac are flowering.
- Avoid burning these plants because urushiol can cause lung irritation when inhaled.
- Cut poisonous vines in trees six inches above ground level. Apply glyphosate to the stump immediately to kill the roots and prevent sprouting. If resprouting does occur, treat the leaves with glyphosate.



<sup>1</sup> American Skin Association. "Poison Ivy, Sumac and Oak." Webpage. <https://www.americanskin.org/resource/poisonivy.php>. Accessed June 18, 2021.

# Poison Ivy, Oak, and Sumac Myths and Facts

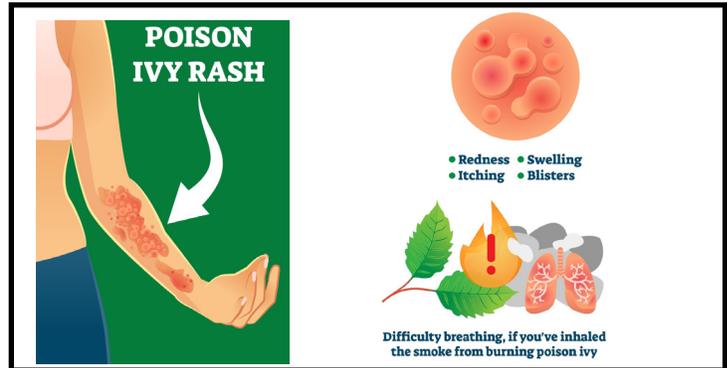
- Myth #1** ***Poison ivy rash is contagious.***  
Nope. Rubbing the rash does not spread poison ivy to other parts of your body (or to another person). You spread the rash only if urushiol oil is left on your hands or another surface.
- Myth #2** ***You can catch poison ivy simply by being near the plants.***  
Try again. Direct contact with the plants is needed to release urushiol oil. However, forest fires, direct burning, lawnmowers, and trimmers can cause the urushiol oil to become airborne.
- Myth #3** ***The saying, "Leaves of three, let them be."***  
Not always. While poison ivy and oak have three leaves per cluster, poison sumac has 7-13 leaves on a branch.
- Myth #4** ***Do not worry about dead plants.***  
Big mistake. Urushiol oil stays active on any surface, including dead plants, for up to five years.
- Myth #5** ***Breaking the blisters releases urushiol oil that can spread.***  
Not true. Wounds, however, can become infected and make the scarring worse. In extreme cases, excessive fluid may need to be withdrawn by a doctor.
- Myth #6** ***I have touched poison ivy many times and never had an allergic reaction. That means I am immune.***  
Not necessarily true. The more times a person is exposed to urushiol, the more likely they will get an allergic reaction. Generally, it takes longer for the rash to show up for the first-time sufferer, usually 7-10 days.

## What to Do If Exposed

Because urushiol can penetrate the skin within minutes, do not waste time if exposed. The faster the skin is cleaned, the better the chance of removing the urushiol before it penetrates the skin. Cleaning may not stop the initial outbreak of the rash if more than 10 minutes has passed, but it can help prevent the rash from spreading.

If exposed to poison ivy, oak, or sumac, stay indoors and wear gloves (dispose of after use) until the following steps are completed:

- 1. Cleanse exposed skin with generous amounts of rubbing (isopropyl) alcohol.**  
Do not return to the woods, yard, or riverbank the same day. Alcohol removes the skin's protection along with the urushiol. Any new contact can cause the urushiol to penetrate faster.
- 2. Wash cleansed skin with water.**  
Do not use soap yet.
- 3. Shower with soap and warm water.**  
Again, do not use soap before this point. The soap can pick up urushiol on the skin and move it to new areas.
- 4. Wear disposable gloves to wipe off shoes, tools, and anything else that came into contact with the urushiol.**  
First, use alcohol, then water.
- 5. Wash clothing separately.**  
Use hot water with detergent.



## Treating the Rash



If the exposed area is not cleaned quickly and thoroughly, or if the skin is sensitive, redness, swelling, itching, and blisters may appear within 12 to 48 hours. For people with a first-time exposure, the rash may not appear until 7 to 10 days.

The oozing blisters are not contagious. The blister fluid does not contain urushiol to infect other parts of the person's body. Nevertheless, scratching the blisters with fingernails that may carry germs could cause an infection.

The rash only occurs where urushiol has touched the skin. It does not spread throughout the body. However, the rash may seem to spread if it appears over time instead of all at once. This apparent delayed reaction is because the urushiol is absorbed at different rates in different parts of the body or because of repeated exposure to contaminated objects or urushiol trapped under the fingernails.

Consult a physician before using any of the following remedies for relief of symptoms:

## Itch Relief

The rash, blisters, and itch usually disappear in 14 to 20 days without any treatment. Temporary itch relief may be found by using wet compresses or soaking in cool water. Other methods of itch relief include:

- oral or topical [antihistamines](#);
- over-the-counter topical [corticosteroids](#) (commonly called [hydrocortisones](#)); or
- [topical anesthetics](#) to numb the itchy rash, such as menthol, [benzocaine](#), and [pramoxine](#).

## Treating the Blisters

There are several over-the-counter products to help dry up oozing blisters including:

- [aluminum acetate](#);
- baking soda;
- oatmeal bath;
- [aluminum hydroxide gel](#);
- [calamine](#);
- [kaolin](#);
- [zinc acetate](#);
- [zinc carbonate](#); and
- [zinc oxide](#).

## Signs of an Emergency

For severe cases, prescription topical corticosteroid drugs can halt the reaction, but only if treatment begins within a few hours of exposure. The [American Academy of Dermatology](#) recommends that people who have had severe reactions before contact a dermatologist as soon as possible after a new exposure.

In rare cases, persons who are highly allergic to poison ivy, oak, and sumac may break out in a rash and begin to swell in 4 to 12 hours. Then, their eyes may swell shut, and blisters may erupt on their skin. In this emergency event, call 911 and get the victim to a hospital as soon as possible.





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