Poison Ivy Allergy

“Leaves of three, let them be...”
is an old adage that many of us should heed, especially those who are allergic to poison ivy. Allergic reactions to three native American plants—poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac—all members of the plant genus Toxicodendron—have been sources of misery for many centuries. According to experts at the American Academy of Dermatology, approximately 85% of the population will develop an allergic reaction if exposed to them.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS:
Approximately 12-48 hours after exposure to poison ivy, oak or sumac, in susceptible persons, contact with these plants leads to a skin rash. This is known as allergic contact dermatitis, which is an inflammation of the skin.

The resin of all three contains an active oily ingredient known as urushiol. When you come into contact with the leaves or roots of the plants, you are very likely to develop a rash. In some people, very small amounts of the chemical can provoke a serious reaction. These plants are very fragile plants whose stems and leaves broken by the wind, animals, or even the tiny holes made by chewing insects can release urushiol.

Urushiol is transferred easily from one object to another, so clothing or tools that touch the plants, or pets that rub against them, can pick up the plant oil and pass it directly to the person. The chemical can remain active for at least one year and sometimes much longer. Therefore, exposed objects or pets should be thoroughly cleansed with water after contact with the plants.

Scratching or the spontaneous oozing of the rash and blisters will NOT cause them to spread because urushiol is not present in the blister fluid.

If the chemical has not been completely washed off the skin, touching the affected areas then another part of the body can transfer the chemical and thus the rash. The rash cannot be passed between persons, unless urushiol is still present on the skin of the affected individual.

Usually, no visible reaction will occur the first time a person comes in contact with poison ivy, oak, or sumac. Many times, one may not even realize that they have been in contact with it. If a rash does appear, it may be 7-10 days later. Repeated low-level exposures over a period of years are generally necessary for a person to reach this level of sensitization, and many people never develop an allergic contact dermatitis from poison ivy, oak, or sumac plants.

The resin of all three plants are not identical but are sufficiently similar for a person allergic to one to react to all three. They are members of the cashew family which includes several trees—cashew, mango, Japanese lacquer and Indian marking nut. Skin rashes have followed contact with wooden and lacquered articles produced in Asia and with the oil from the cashew nut shell.
What are the symptoms?

The itchy rash characteristic of an allergic reaction to poison ivy, oak, or sumac usually develops within 12-48 hours after a sensitized person comes in contact with the urushiol. The time may be as short as 4 hours or as long as 10 days, depending on one’s sensitivity and the extent of the contact. The rash is usually self-limited. It is at its worst about 5 days after it starts, and gradually improves within a week or two even without treatment.

The skin becomes red, then bumps and blisters appear. This is usually accompanied by itching sometimes by swelling. After several days, the blisters break and the oozing sores begin to crust over and disappear. Scratching the rash may introduce bacteria into the open sore causing a secondary bacterial infection. Severe infections may produce symptoms such as abscesses, enlarged glands, and fever.

A person should see a physician if the rash is severe on the face or genitals, or covers more than 20% of the body. The physician may prescribe medications to reduce the itching and inflammation.

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