

BE WELL

Outsmarting Poison Ivy

By Debbie DeAngelo
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First comes the itching. Then the red rash. Finally, the blisters. Nothing puts the kibosh on summer fun faster than a case of poison ivy. Some poor souls seem to contract it every summer. It can range from mild and uncomfortable to severe and miserable.

In an attempt to outsmart it, we must separate fact from fiction. Let's look at some frequently asked questions about poison ivy.

What does the plant look like? “Leaves of three, let it be” is an accurate adage. Poison ivy typically has three green leaves on each stem. Depending on

the time of year, the leaves can change color to red, orange, or yellow. The plant can appear as ground cover or grow as a vine and loves to reside in partial shade.

How do you get it? Touching any part of the plant will transfer the oily resin called urushiol. This substance is the culprit. It triggers contact dermatitis in allergic individuals. The resin can reside on objects such as gardening tools, clothing, gloves, shoes, toys, and camping equipment, as well as pets. If you come into contact with them and the resin is present, you can develop a case of poison ivy. Surprisingly, urushiol lingers and remains active on clothes and objects for several years unless it's washed off with soap and water or rubbing alcohol.

Is it contagious? No. Poison ivy is not like a cold. You can't catch it from another individual, even if you touch the rash (unless they still have the resin on their skin). You must come into contact with the urushiol. If objects or pets are contaminated with this resin, and you touch them, then you can get it.

How does it spread on my body? Allergic individuals usually begin itching and see the skin rash erupting within 24 to 48 hours of contact; however, it can be delayed by up to a week. This fuels the misconception that the rash spreads, when actually it hasn't fully erupted yet. The fluid-filled blisters follow the rash. Fluid from these lesions doesn't contain urushiol and can't cause a rash.

What should I do after touching poison ivy? Remove your clothing and launder it. Immediately wash your skin with soap and water as the resin can bond to your skin within minutes. The sooner you remove it, the less likely it is to irritate your skin. Jewelweed, a plant that commonly grows near poison ivy, is reputed to be an antidote to urushiol. Mashing the plant and applying it to the skin does seem to work; however, studies have not shown it to be any more effective than soap and water. Jewelweed extract products weren't found to be useful.

How can I manage the itching? Symptomatic relief includes baking soda or oatmeal soaks, calamine lotion, antihistamines, and over-the-counter steroid creams. Sometimes oral steroid medication is prescribed. Most cases will go away on their own within three weeks, but you may be pretty uncomfortable in the meantime.

Can poison ivy be prevented? Prevention consists of avoiding it, which may be easier said than done. Be on the lookout for the plant whenever you're outdoors in grassy or wooded areas that are partially shaded. When doing yardwork, wear long sleeves, pants, and gloves. Wash your garden tools and gloves regularly. Wear rubber gloves to bathe your pets if you think they have come into contact with the plant. They won't get poison ivy, but they can spread the oil to you. Also, do not get rid of poison ivy plants by burning it. It releases

the harmful substance into the air, where it still comes into contact with your skin, as well as your lungs.

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