

# Poison Ivy, Oak & Sumac

Here are some tips to teach you about poison ivy, oak and sumac, how to treat it and avoid it.

## Recognizing the Plants

You should know how to recognize poison ivy and its two related plants, poison oak and poison sumac. All three plants contain an oil that causes an itchy rash.

- **Poison ivy (A)** leaves have three parts. It is a vine in the East, Midwest and South, and a shrub in the far Northern and Western United States, Canada and around the Great Lakes. The plant grows to 10 feet or more, and climbs high on trees, walls and fences or along trails on the ground. All parts of poison ivy, including the roots, are poisonous at all times of the year.



A. Poison Ivy

- **Poison oak (B)** may grow as a vine but usually is a shrub. Its leaves have three segments and appear shiny.

- **Poison sumac (C)** has a row of 7-13 paired leaflets. It grows in standing water in peat bogs in the Northeast and Midwest and in swampy areas in parts of the Southeast.



B. Poison Oak

These plants are most dangerous in spring and summer.

## How the Rash Occurs

The rash from poison ivy, oak or sumac is caused by contact with the oils found in the sap of these plants. However, you don't have to touch the plant to get a rash. Contact with the oils can occur by:

- Direct contact — touching the sap of the plant;
- Indirect contact — touching something that has the oil on it (animal fur, garden tools, sports equipment, clothing); and
- Airborne oil particles, such as from burning plants.



C. Poison Sumac

## Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of poison ivy, oak and sumac contact vary from mild to severe:

- Typical reactions are redness and swelling of the skin, often followed by blisters and severe itching. The blisters tend to crust and scale after a few days. Healing takes about 10 days.

- Thin-skinned areas, such as the face, are particularly sensitive, and the rash may break out in new areas after the first exposure.

- Severe rash with blisters and swelling on the face, arms, legs and genitals can occur. If you experience this, call your doctor right away.

## Immediate Action

- If you know you've touched poison ivy, oak or sumac, wash all exposed skin with cold water as soon as you can reach a stream, lake, garden hose or your home.

- Wash with soap and water within the first 30 minutes, if possible.

- Avoid touching rugs or furniture. Wash your clothing with a garden hose or a bucket of water outside, or in a washing machine with detergent.

- Wash camping, sporting, fishing or hunting gear that may have touched the oil.

## Treating the Rash

- For mild rashes, take cool showers. Soaking in a warm bath with an oatmeal or baking soda solution may ease itching and help dry blisters.

- Apply over-the-counter lotions and creams like calamine lotion. Hydrocortisone creams, used to relieve itching, are not strong enough on poison ivy rashes.

- If the rash is severe, consult your doctor, who may give you a prescription for cortisone.

- Do not scratch your blisters; it may lead to infection.

## To Avoid the Rash

- Wear long pants and long sleeves, boots and gloves in areas where poison ivy, oak or sumac may grow.

- Do not let pets run through wooded areas since they may carry home oil from the plants on their fur.

- Do not burn plants that look like poison ivy, oak or sumac.

- Before activities in wooded areas, apply over-the-counter skin creams and lotions that prevent the oils from penetrating the skin.

Compiled by Abigail Scott with information from the American Academy of Dermatology. <http://www.aad.org/pamphlets/PoisonIvy.html>

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