

# Poison Ivy

Poison ivy is a plant that causes a very itchy, red rash. The rash is an allergic response to a chemical in the plant's resin (sap). The resin can remain on skin, clothing, pets, and other surfaces, so it can cause a rash even if your child doesn't come into direct contact with the poison ivy plant. Other plants, including poison oak and poison sumac, can cause similar reactions.

## What is poison ivy?

*Poison ivy* is a plant that causes an intense, sometimes severe skin rash with itching. The rash develops after the skin comes into contact with a chemical found in the plant's resin. It is a type of allergic reaction called "contact dermatitis."

In addition to direct contact with the plant, the resin can be spread over other parts of the body by scratching or rubbing, or from contact with clothing or animal fur. If one has had poison ivy before ("sensitized"), the rash usually develops within a few days after coming into contact with the resin. If not, it may take longer—up to a few weeks.

Poison ivy is found in most parts of the United States and can grow as either a shrub or vine. The leaves are notched and grow in threes on a stem. *Poison oak* and *poison sumac* are less widespread plants that cause similar allergic contact dermatitis reactions. Poison oak is a shrubby plant with three leaves that look like oak leaves. Poison sumac is a woody plant with paired leaves on either side of a long stem.

## What does it look like?

A red, itchy rash develops in areas of the skin that have come into contact with the poison ivy resin.

- Red bumps appear, often with blisters of different sizes.
- The skin may become crusted, scabbed, and oozing.
- The rash can appear in streaks where the skin brushed up against the plant. However, other patterns are possible, depending on how the resin got into contact with the skin. For example, if a dog has been in poison ivy and your child then pets or hugs it, the rash will appear in those areas that touched the pet.
- The rash may be mild or severe, depending on whether you've had poison ivy before and how your particular skin reacts to it.
- If the rash is severe, especially when it's on the face, lots of swelling may occur.

- The rash and itching often get worse for a few days before they start to get better. It may take a few weeks for the rash to go away completely.

## What are some possible complications of poison ivy?

- Once you've had one reaction to poison ivy, future reactions are likely to appear more rapidly and be more severe.
- Especially with scratching, bacterial infections of the skin (such as impetigo) may occur.

## Can poison ivy be prevented?

- The best prevention is to recognize poison ivy and stay away from it!
- Another good preventive step is to wear long sleeves and pants while walking in wooded areas. (This also lowers the risk of tick bites.) However, the resin can still get on your clothes if you come into contact with poison ivy. Wash your clothes as soon as possible.
- If you come into contact with poison ivy, wash the skin as soon as possible—preferably within 30 minutes. Wash thoroughly, including under the fingernails.
- If trying to eliminate the poison ivy plant, don't burn it because smoke can carry the resin onto the skin, particularly the face.


## How is poison ivy treated?

Once the rash of poison ivy has appeared, treatments can help control itching and inflammation.

- Mild cases are treated with lotions that reduce itching, such as calamine lotion, or a weak steroid cream, such as 1% hydrocortisone. Both can be bought over the counter.
- A cool compress (washcloth soaked in cool water) can be helpful, especially if the rash is crusting or oozy.
- For more severe cases, the doctor may prescribe a stronger topical (placed on the skin) steroid cream. These medications help reduce inflammation and itching.
- The doctor may also recommend oral antihistamines to help control itching.
- For severe cases—including swelling of the face or genitals—the doctor may prescribe an oral steroid for a week or longer.

*Removing poison ivy*—If you have the poison ivy plant on your property, it can be difficult to eliminate. Herbicides

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may work but can kill other plants as well. You can eliminate the plant by pulling it up by hand, but make sure to wear appropriate gloves and other protective clothing.  *Never burn poison ivy!* (For more removal tips, see the Internet resource listed at the end of this topic.)

### When should I call your office?

Call our office if any of the following occurs:

- Medications aren't helping after a few days.

- The rash becomes more severe or starts to involve the face or genital area.
- Signs of bacterial infection develop, especially pus oozing from skin blisters.

### Where can I get more information?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has a useful article on “Outsmarting Poison Ivy and Its Cousins,” including more tips for prevention, treatment, and removal. Go online at [http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/796\\_ivy.html](http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/796_ivy.html).