

Poison Oak/Poison Ivy Dermatitis

Poison oak and poison ivy are contracted from plants. It can be acquired by direct contact, by inhaling droplets of the plants' juices when they are burned, or by touching a person or object that has come in contact with the plant oil. Urushiol, the oily allergen present in both plants, is so potent that even 1/1000 of a milligram can produce a rash.

About half the population is susceptible to poison oak and poison ivy. However, people can become sensitized to it over time. It is an allergy and as such requires a number of exposures before the allergy develops. Sensitivity can arise anytime during a person's lifetime.

There is no available immunization method or allergy shot for poison oak and poison ivy.

The best form of prevention is to avoid the plants. Poison oak and poison ivy grow as shrubs or as vines with leaves growing in clusters of three. If you have these plants growing in your yard, get rid of them. Do not attempt to dig them up or bury them under the soil. You will need to use an herbicide. When the plants die, do not handle them. Just let them shrivel up on their own.

If you must walk in an area where these plants grow, protect your skin by wearing long sleeves, long pants, shoes and socks and even gloves. Afterwards, wash everything thoroughly.

Myths about poison oak and poison ivy dermatitis include the theory that fluid from the dermatitis blisters will cause the rash to spread. This is not true. The fluid in the blisters is sterile and contains no allergens. You may see the rash spreading because after contact, the full eruption can take up to two weeks or so.

An outbreak of poison oak or poison ivy dermatitis does not necessarily require expert medical attention. It will depend on the intensity of the reaction, what areas of the body are involved, and whether you have a history of severe reactions. If you are concerned about your reaction, call Family Dermatology for advice. In some cases, a prescription may be appropriate.

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