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## Avoiding Poisonous Plants on the Job

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*Know what to look for to prevent discomfort*

According to the FDA, approximately 85 percent of the population will develop an allergic reaction when exposed to poison ivy, oak or sumac. As a result, outdoor workers need to take the necessary precautions to protect themselves against these poisonous plants to remain illness-free.

### How are Plants Dangerous?

Unlike non-poisonous plants, poison oak, ivy and sumac contain a chemical called urushiol, which causes rashes, blisters and constant itching. This chemical is found inside of the plants, so brushing against them won't cause a negative reaction. Unfortunately, most plants are damaged or broken due to wind and animals exposing the urushiol. Urushiol can stick to your tools and your clothing, so when you touch these items, you may experience a reaction. Urushiol that rubs off from plants onto other objects can remain potent for years, depending on your environment.

### What do Poisonous Plants Look Like?

The general rule is that if the plant has "leaves of three, let it be," however, many plants have groups of five to nine leaves. Here's what else to look for:

#### Poison Ivy

- Grows near lakes and streams in the Midwest and East
- Has a woody, rope-like vine, a trailing shrub on the ground or a free-standing shrub
- Normally have three leaves but could have more, which are green in the summer and red in the fall. Also have yellow or green flowers and white berries.

#### Poison Oak

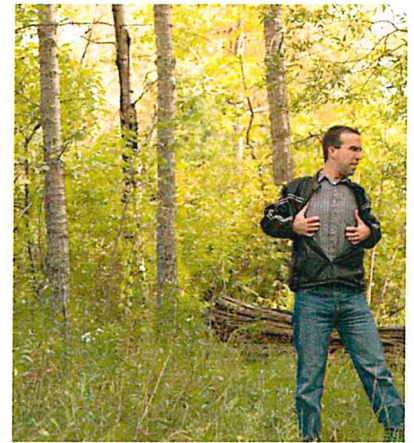
- Grows as a low shrub from New Jersey to Texas and as a tall vine along the Pacific coast
- Contains oak-like leaves in clusters of three with clumps of yellow berries

#### Poison Sumac

- Grows in boggy areas, especially in the Southeast
- Grows as a shrub up to 15 feet tall with seven to 13 smooth-edged leaves. Also has a glossy, pale yellow or cream-colored berry.

#### Treatment

- Cleanse exposed skin with rubbing alcohol and wash with the area with water. Then, take a shower with soap and warm water. Do not use soap until the second washing, because you could initially move the urushiol around on the skin with the soap.
- Wipe clothing, shoes, tools, etc. off with rubbing alcohol and water. Always wear gloves and throw them away when you are done.
- Redness and swelling can appear within 12 to 48 hours after exposure, and blisters and itching may accompany it. The reaction should disappear within 14 to 20 days without treatment, but your body's response to urushiol is often difficult to manage without treatment. Use a wet compress and take an oral antihistamine for relief. You can also use a topical hydrocortisone on the affected area to relieve itching.



### What if You are Extremely Sensitive?

If you develop a severe reaction to poison oak, ivy or sumac, there are a few treatment options for you. Your doctor may prescribe a topical or oral hydrocortisone to halt your reaction. Oral medications are especially helpful if the reaction is on your face, genitals or covers more than 30 percent of your body.

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