

POISON OAK - Present Year-Round

Summer is the time we see the most cases of Poison Oak because more people are venturing into rural and country areas. However, Poison Oak is present all year-round and the plant can cause a rash even when there are no leaves on its branches. Poison Oak is a native plant found in the western United states. Similar plants (poison ivy and poison sumac) are found east of the Mississippi but not in California. Poison Oak grows wildly from sea level to over 5,000 feet in elevation.

Approximately 80-85% of all individuals are allergic and those who aren't may develop the allergy at any time. The offending substance is an oil called urushiol that is produced by the plant and is rapidly absorbed by the skin, causing irritation, itching and blisters 1-6 days later. The rash may last for up to 2 weeks and is usually treated by procedures to decrease itching and medicine to decrease inflammation (antihistamines, topical steroids) or, if severe, systemic corticosteroids. Each time a person contracts Poison Oak they may become more sensitive and have a greater reaction. Long periods between exposures may decrease the body's reaction to Poison Oak.

We have personally, and with our patients, found that the use of TECNU (over-the-counter at pharmacies and grocery stores) applied to exposed areas prior to encountering Poison Oak then washed off and reapplied as soon as possible to be effective in preventing skin outbreaks. TECNU seems to denature the oil. If used greater than 8 hours after exposure it is much less likely to be effective. Since the offending toxin is oil, it can remain on the fur of animals (i.e. pets), clothing, wood products, etc. for long periods of time and can expose sensitive people or articles and therefore should be washed down with soap and water or TECNU.

Once a person is exposed to Poison Oak, a shower or bath will assure he/she will not expose others to the toxin, even if the rash has wet or weeping blisters. If other members of the family get the rash, the most likely cause of exposure will be from articles, pets, or other substances that still retain the oil.

If the patient has a significant rash, he/she should be seen by a physician as the diagnosis is a visual one and the doctor will need to determine the best therapy depending on the severity of the condition.

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(Adapted from healthychildren.org)