

## Medications – Treatment and Relief

Unfortunately, no cure or vaccine is available. But there are treatments, some of which must be administered by a health care practitioner, particularly when the rash affects the face.

Facial contact can be treated with either oral or injected cortisone-type preparations. Antihistamines are useful in providing relief and controlling itching, as are cool, moist compresses made with baking soda or Burrow's solution (aluminum acetate), and topical cortisones. Broken skin invites infection, and antibiotics may then be necessary. There are other topical solutions that cause blistered skin to dry and heal. Once the face is dry, emollient creams, lotions, and ointments may be used.

**REMEMBER:** Avoiding contact is the best treatment.

Consult a health care practitioner for assistance on methods of treatment and medications.

For additional information and assistance, contact:

- » Your local MSHA office
- » **Metal/Nonmetal Mine Safety and Health**  
Arlington, Virginia  
202-693-9630
- » **Coal Mine Safety and Health**  
Arlington, Virginia  
202-693-9510
- » **Pittsburgh Safety and Health  
Technology Center**  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
412-386-6901

U.S. Department of Labor  
Mine Safety and Health Administration  
Visit our Web site at [www.msha.gov](http://www.msha.gov)

March 2009

# Poison Plants



## Health Hazard Information Card HH-14

Poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac are the three most common urushiol-oil-containing plants in this country, although they are unknown in Hawaii and northern Alaska. Each year they cause almost two million cases of skin inflammation (dermatitis) that can be extremely distressing.

### Regions Where Plants Are Found

#### Poison Ivy

The **common poison ivy**, in six subspecies, thrives from southern Maine to Florida and as far west as Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. It can also be found near the Mexican border in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico. Humid weather and rich damp soil favor its spread, but it can persist in what might seem unfavorable circumstances.



**Rydberg's poison ivy** is the most northerly ranging species of poison ivy and can generally be found in moist habitats in the northern and mountain states.

#### Poison Oak



**Poison oak** is a woody plant that grows in dry barren areas from southern New Jersey to northern Florida and as far west as Oklahoma.

**Pacific poison oak**, as the name implies, is found in California, Oregon, and Washington. It has

adapted to a wide range of habitats from rich loam soil to rock crevices and can be found from sea level to about 5000 feet.

#### Poison Sumac

**Poison sumac** is usually found along the margins of swamps and bogs, where the soil is acid and wet, throughout the U.S. This shrub can grow to 20 or more feet high and is never found in the vine-like form of its ivy relatives. Poison sumac shrubs in dry soil are stunted but **just as poisonous** as the larger version. They look harmless but can poison the unwary.



### Plant Identification

The key to protection from *urushiol* is the ability to recognize and avoid the plants that carry the poison. The folk wisdom: "Leaflets three, let it be" is a good rule for any worker assigned tasks around unknown vegetation. All the plants mentioned **except** poison sumac have three-leaf stems. Two side leaves appear to be symmetrical, growing close to the stem while the end leaf is distinct and alone. Poison sumac, with a longer stem, can have seven, nine, eleven, or thirteen leaves; these also grow in symmetrical pairs close to the stem with the solo leaf at the end.

Recognizing this distinctive pattern – symmetrical pairs of leaves plus one distinct leaf at the end of the stem, which always adds up to an odd number – means avoid contact.

### Direct Exposure Protection

In the rare instance where contact with *urushiol*-bearing plants cannot be avoided, workers must take precautions. Work trousers tied at the boot mouth, a long-sleeved shirt, and gauntlet-type gloves will usually protect against **direct** contact with the skin.

Applying barrier cream (such as *bento-quantam* 5%) before working around these plants will protect most people. Depending on the length of potential exposure time, the cream must be reapplied every four hours for continuous protection. There are also some pre-exposure drugs that have had mixed results.

### Indirect Exposure Protection

Guarding against indirect contamination requires greater vigilance. The casual wipe of a contaminated glove against the head can cause the characteristic rash, and smoke from burning *urushiol*-containing plants can inflame the mouth, nose, throat, and lungs.

### After Contact

*Urushiol* can remain on skin, clothing, and tools for a long time after contact. Using rubbing alcohol on a swab, cotton ball, or similar method, followed with flushing with water is one method of removing the oil from the face (care must be taken to keep the alcohol out of the eyes, nose, and mouth). Washing surfaces with cool flowing water – a nearby stream, river, or garden hose – is the best way to remove *urushiol* oil. If soap is used, rinse it off thoroughly. Wash all contaminated clothing separately, if possible.

### Rash and Other Reactions

*Urushiol* oil penetrates the skin within minutes. At first, the site of contact will be red – typically arranged as a red line – swollen, and "itchy." Gradually itching becomes more intense, and blisters will appear within 24-72 hours. Persons who have had past exposure and reactions may blister sooner.

The rash lasts for up to two weeks and its severity will vary. Controlling the itching is critical in preventing infection through scratched broken skin.