

Best Home Remedies for Poison Ivy

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April 27, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Poison ivy, oak and sumac are closely related poison plants growing in different parts of the U.S., except in Hawaii, Alaska and parts of Nevada
- › Poison ivy rash results from exposure to the plant's urushiol oil that may be transferred from garden equipment, pets and other people; refrain from burning the plant as you may breathe in the oil, causing swelling in your lungs
- › At-home treatments with apple cider vinegar, baking soda, oatmeal, banana peel and watermelon rind may help reduce the symptoms of the dermatitis and speed healing

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 8, 2017.

Poison ivy, oak and sumac are closely related plants, and may be found growing in similar environments. In fact, all three grow throughout the U.S. except Hawaii, Alaska and parts of Nevada.¹ Poison ivy is found throughout the U.S.; poison sumac is distributed mostly on the East Coast, from Maine to Florida; and poison oak is found along the West Coast and the south, from Texas to Florida and as far north as Illinois.²

While irritating and uncomfortable, poison ivy is not usually dangerous, unless the oil is aerosolized from burning. Inhaling the fumes can trigger an allergic reaction in your lungs. Nearly three-quarters of the population of the U.S. will break out into a rash when exposed to the plant leaves. Only 25% appear to be resistant to the contact dermatitis that results from exposure to the oil in the plant.³

The rash can be unbearably itchy if left untreated. However, while your primary care physician may want to prescribe a corticosteroid to address the symptoms, there are much safer treatments you may begin at home that don't come with a slew of side effects. Steroids are commonly prescribed for a number of different conditions, including contact dermatitis, [asthma](#), ulcerative colitis, cancer and arthritis.

They can be given topically, by injection, through inhalation or by mouth. In each case, the medication is linked with significant side effects, including fluid retention, elevated blood pressure, osteoporosis, mood swings and increased risk of infection.⁴ In other words, these are drugs you want to steer clear of as much as possible. Learn to recognize the plant (as prevention is the best medicine) and the treatments you can use at home to alleviate the symptoms as your skin heals.

Recognize the Poison Ivy Plant

The old adage, "leaves of three, let them be," is helpful to identify poison ivy and poison oak, but poison sumac grows with seven to 13 leaves on a stem.⁵ However, depending upon your geographic location, species of the plant and the local environment, even the poison ivy plant may look different.

To reduce your chances of coming into contact with the plant, learn how to identify local varieties and differentiate them from other similar-looking plants. You may try speaking with your local gardening shop or using online sites such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service,⁶ or the National Audubon Society Native Plants Database.⁷

The eastern poison ivy plant (*Toxicodendron radicans*) typically has small hairs on the leaves and grows on rope-like vines that may grow up a tree or along the ground.⁸ They have three shiny, green leaves that turn red in the fall. Despite turning color in the fall, the leaves still contain the oil that causes the rash.

On the other hand, western poison ivy (*Toxicodendron rydbergii*) grows as a low shrub with three leaves and does not climb. The eastern species rarely grows west of mid-

Kansas, while the western variety populates most states, except the southeastern U.S.;⁹ either species of poison ivy may have white or yellow flowers and produce green-yellow or amber-colored berries.

How the Rash Starts

The contact dermatitis you get from poison ivy is the result of a reaction to the oil in the plant, urushiol (pronounced you-roo-she-all). This oil is in the flowers, stem, leaves and roots. It takes very little of the oil to cause the reaction and the oil remains active in the plant long after the plant has died.¹⁰ Exposure to an amount less than a grain of salt may cause a significant reaction if you are highly allergic.

The rash typically begins in the first 12 to 72 hours after exposure to the plant, or any piece of clothing, lawn equipment or pet on which the oil has been deposited. While poison ivy is not truly contagious, if you touch someone who has the oil on their skin and it transfers to your skin, you may share the experience.

Within a couple of hours of contact with the urushiol, it is absorbed and metabolized.¹¹ Your immune cells recognize it as a foreign substance, sending out cytokines and white blood cells to take care of the invader. In this process, some of your normal tissue is damaged, which results in the symptoms you experience. In some cases, you may not react with your first or second exposure, leading you to believe you won't get the rash.

However, increasing numbers of people have the allergic reaction to urushiol with repeated exposure. So, if you didn't develop the classic poison ivy rash the first time you were exposed, you may the second or third time. Symptoms of the poison ivy rash appear on the area of skin exposed to the oil, and any other areas to which the oil transferred.

In other words, if you touched the plant then scratched your nose and swatted a fly on your arm, you'll likely develop symptoms on your hand, nose and arm. The symptoms of poison ivy, oak and sumac include:¹²

Redness	Itching	Swelling
Blisters	Weeping at the blisters	Pain or burning at the site
Lesions can continue to appear for up to two weeks	Difficulty breathing if the plant was burned and you inhaled the fumes	Blisters may be in streaks depending upon how the oil was deposited on your skin

As much as possible, refrain from scratching the rash as bacteria under your nails can infect the broken skin caused by the blisters. Keep the area clean with soap and water to reduce the potential for infection. In most cases you can treat your poison ivy at home, unless you know you have breathed in plants that had been burned or you begin to have trouble breathing. It may also be necessary to see your doctor if:¹³

The reaction on your skin is severe or widespread	Your skin continues to swell over several days	The rash affects the area on or around your eyes, genitals or mouth
Your blisters begin oozing pus	You have a fever greater than 100 Fahrenheit (37.8 Celsius)	The rash doesn't improve significantly, or get better, within a few weeks

Prevention: Getting It and Spreading It

If you find poison ivy in your yard, there are several precautionary tactics you'll want to use to prevent getting the rash. The first is to keep exposed skin away from the plants. If you have poison ivy in a wooded area and decide to leave it, ensure the rest of your family and neighbors who may use the area are aware of the situation.

If you are clearing an area of garden that may have poison ivy, oak or sumac, or if you are spreading a new load of mulch, you'll want to wear long sleeves, long pants and

gloves. Depending upon your mulch supplier, poison ivy plants and the potent, active oil may have been mulched with the wood chips.

Once out of the garden, remove your gloves and clothing as described below and wash your hands and any exposed skin. Hose off your garden equipment with mild soap and ensure your dog didn't follow you into areas of the **garden** that may have poison ivy, oak or sumac. For the most part, your furry friend won't experience contact dermatitis from poison plants as often as you do, as their coat protects them from the oil reaching the skin.¹⁴

Still, if you suspect your dog or cat has been in or near poison ivy, it may be prudent to give them a bath to prevent the oil from soaking to their skin or from transferring the oil to you or one of your family members.

Be aware the oil in the plant is hardy and remains potent long past the life of the plant. Most cases of poison ivy contact dermatitis occur in the summer months, but some cases may show up in the dead of winter. Dr. David Adams, a professor of dermatology at Penn State University, has seen cases near Christmas when people buying live trees rip dead vines off the trees, not realizing they are poison ivy.¹⁵

Removing the Plant From Your Yard

You'll want to use a safe and effective method to kill the plants that are in your yard without resorting to chemicals that damage the environment and may poison you as well. No matter what method you use to remove the plants, it's essential you take a few moments to cover your skin with long pants, long shirt and gloves.¹⁶ The extra minutes you spend preparing may save you days of itching and burning.

Duct tape your pants around your socks and your shirt around your gloves, ensuring the gloves you're using don't have holes. Once you're done treating or pulling the poison ivy, you will want to strip off the clothes you're wearing, being careful that you don't touch the outside of the clothes with your bare hands. You may want to have a friend remove your gloves while they are wearing disposable vinyl gloves.

Then, donning a pair of vinyl gloves yourself, remove the remainder of your clothes and immediately wash them twice in hot water.¹⁷ This may seem extreme, but could save you days of discomfort and pain. Poison ivy is a perennial plant, which means it could take three or four tries to eradicate it.¹⁸

The fastest way to get rid of the plants is to dig them up, ensure you get at least 8 inches deep into the soil to remove as much of the root system as possible.¹⁹ Disposal of the plants you dig up is another important factor to reduce the spread of the oil.

Do not compost, shred or burn the plants as this causes the oil to spread. During burning, the oil aerosolizes and may cause contact dermatitis over your face, hands and any other exposed skin.²⁰ Instead, bag the plants and roots in plastic and dispose of them in the garbage.

Once the plants are removed, cover the area with cardboard or mulch to help prevent regrowth of the plants. Watch the area around the cardboard for tiny plants that may grow from roots you may have missed.

If suiting up and digging up the plants isn't your style, consider a nontoxic solution of 1 cup of salt, 1 gallon of water and a tablespoon of dish soap.²¹ Mix this solution thoroughly and pour it into a sprayer. Use the stream setting on the sprayer if the plant is close to other plants you would like to save, as this formulation will kill all plant growth.

How to Treat Poison Ivy at Home

If you know you've been exposed to poison ivy, oak or sumac, take precautions to minimize any potential outbreak. James Brauker, Ph.D., spent 25 years as a biomedical scientist studying skin inflammation. In this video, he explains the method he has used to reduce or eliminate outbreaks of contact dermatitis from the urushiol oil.

Once you have an outbreak, for the most part you may treat it at home, using natural products to help reduce the swelling, itching and pain without resorting to over-the-counter medications. Try a combination of the following remedies to address each of the different symptoms. Left untreated, your poison ivy will often resolve spontaneously

within two to three weeks. These treatments may help your body heal faster and will often relieve the pain and itching from the contact dermatitis.^{22,23}

Remove the oil – Alcohol wipes may help to remove the oil from your skin if you don't have immediate access to soap, water and a washcloth. Remove the oil as quickly as possible after exposure to reduce the severity of the rash and possibly eliminate the potential of getting it.

Remember to wipe every area of skin that may have contacted the plant or equipment that had touched the plant. Get between your fingers and use a brush to clean under your nails. Oil that remains under your nails may be spread when you touch other parts of your body. Use cool water and not hot to avoid irritating your skin or opening your pores, as this will allow the urushiol to be absorbed more quickly.

Another astringent you can use to remove the oil is the juice from a **fresh lemon**. Squeeze the juice onto a cotton pad and wipe the area. While this may remove much of the oil, it is important to also wash and use a washcloth to continue to remove the oil. Wash the washcloth in hot water through two cycles to ensure the oil has been removed.

Itching and inflammation – Cold compresses may help soothe the skin and reduce discomfort. Soaking the area in a lukewarm oatmeal bath may help reduce inflammation and soothe your skin. You may use oatmeal in a container that accommodates the entire area or take an oatmeal bath. Filter the water as it leaves the tub or pour the fluid down the garbage disposal from a small basin used to soak an area of your body, so it doesn't clog your drain.

Baking soda in a lukewarm bath is recommended by the American Academy of Dermatology to soothe the skin and reduce inflammation.²⁴ The inside of a banana peel or watermelon rind may also help reduce the itch from the rash.

Do NOT scratch – The rash is very itchy, but you must refrain from scratching as much as possible. Bacteria under your nails may trigger a skin infection and scratching increases the damage to your skin and the potential for scarring. If the

blisters from the rash do break open, leave them alone and cover them to prevent infection.

Reduce the reaction — A paste, made from bentonite clay and water, covering the area where you first notice the contact dermatitis may reduce the reaction your skin experiences, and therefore your symptoms. Bentonite clay is a natural clay that may be purchased at your local health food store.

Speed up healing — Soak a paper bag in [apple cider vinegar](#) and lay it across the rash. If you cool the apple cider vinegar first, it will also help to reduce the itch as the vinegar helps to speed healing of the rash.

Cool the burning — One of the symptoms of contact dermatitis from poison ivy is a burning sensation over the rash area. The gel from an aloe vera plant may help cool the burn from the rash in much the same way it helps soothe a sunburn.

Sources and References

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