



# Poison Oak



Poison oak is a plant found in parks and open spaces throughout the western United States. It grows in a wide range of habitats from sea level to elevations of 5000 feet. Exposure to the oily sap contained in all parts of the poison oak (roots, stem, leaves, flowers, and the fruit/berries) may cause skin irritation ranging from mild to severe. Because poison oak grows low on the ground and thrives in California, young children who play outdoors are at risk for contact with poison oak.



## How to recognize poison oak?

Poison oak is usually a bushy shrub, though it sometimes becomes a climbing vine several inches in diameter that grows high into oak trees attached by air-roots. Poison oak typically has three leaflets (some-

times five). They are shiny, without prickles, and the middle leaf has a distinct stalk. In some areas, the leaves remain green the entire time, in other areas the leaves are red in the spring. It is harder to identify poison oak in the winter, when it loses its leaves and looks like erect bare sticks coming from the ground.

## What symptoms does poison oak cause?

Some people can touch the leaves of poison oak and experience no reaction because they are not allergic to it. But in allergic persons, contact with poison oak causes a reaction that can be very uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous.

Severity of poison oak skin reaction depends on the degree of patient sensitivity, the amount of exposure and the body parts exposed.

The allergen in the oil of the plant is quickly absorbed in the skin of people who are allergic to it. Within 1 to 6 days, skin irritation develops, which may look like red, raised, itchy bumps but may also develop into watery blisters, which can leak a clear liquid called serum. Some victims experience symptoms after as little as 30 minutes. Contrary to popular belief, the leaking serum does not contain the allergen and does not cause the rash to spread to other parts of the body or to other individuals.

The rash can erupt slowly, over several days, which often leads people to assume that the rash is being spread from one part of the body to another, but the slow eruption is caused by the exposure of different parts of the body to varying amounts of the allergen; areas with greater exposure develop the rash quicker. The dermatitis rarely lasts more than 10 days. Future episodes of poison oak are often worse, so children with a prior history of poison oak should be especially careful about coming into contact with it.

In addition to direct contact with the plant, transmission of the allergen can occur from a number of other sources including smoke particles, when poison oak is burned, the oils can be transported on the smoke particles. Breathing this smoke can cause severe respiratory irritation.

## When to seek emergency Care?

Poison oak can also cause a severe reaction that is not confined to the skin. This extreme reaction

is rare but can be life threatening. Symptoms of extreme allergic reaction include itching all over the body, swelling of the tongue, throat or lips, and difficulty in breathing or swallowing, weakness, dizziness, bluish lips and mouth, and unconsciousness. This situation is a medical emergency. If a child in your care is showing signs of a severe allergic reaction, call 9-1-1, then call the parent.

## Can a child with poison oak rash attend child care?

A child with poison oak rash can attend a child care program, provided that the rash is not infected and the child feels well enough to participate in program activities.

## How to help a child with poison oak?

Because the rash is extremely itchy, children with poison oak tend to scratch frequently, even while asleep. Constant scratching can result in skin trauma and children can develop a secondary skin infection that may require treatment with antibiotics. Other possible problems such as irritability from itching and pain and difficulty sleeping can result in the child feeling tired.

- Trim fingernails to avoid trauma to the skin from scratching.
- Cover rash, if possible, to keep the child from scratching.
- Offer soothing treatments, such as lotions, for the itching. Remember, ECE staff must have permission and instructions in writing from parents regarding the use of any over-the-counter or prescription treatments, according to Community Care Licensing Regulations.

## Is poison oak rash contagious?

Though poison oak *looks* contagious, especially when it is oozing clear fluid, a person with poison oak cannot give it to another person. However, the rash can be contracted by touching the oily residue on a pet or on the clothes of a person, who has recently been in contact with

the plant. It is important to wash all clothing and equipment that may have come in contact with the poison oak.

## Tips for preventing poison oak

- Children who do not react to poison oak should be warned that with increased contact with the plant, they may *develop* an allergy to it, so they should avoid contact even if they are not allergic.
- The best way to prevent children and staff from getting poison oak rash is to prevent contact with the plant. Educate staff, families and children about the appearance and presence of poison oak in the community and environment. When visiting parks or other open spaces, be sure to stay in the open, on groomed trails and meadows, and away from dense bushes where poison oak may be growing.
- After coming in contact with the oil, the best way to prevent skin irritation is to rinse the skin with plenty of cold water and soap. Warm water enhances penetration of the oil. Even if it is too late to prevent the rash, wash the skin with lots of cold water and soap to remove plant oil and keep the rash from spreading.
- Avoid using a small amount of water or disposable hand wipes since this will more likely spread the oil than remove it.

For more information call the Child Care Healthline at (800) 333-3212 or visit our Web site at [www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org](http://www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org). You may also find the following topics useful: *Beware of Poisonous Houseplants* (Fact Sheet for Families); *Allergies* (Health & Safety Note); *Summer Safety* (Health & Safety Note.)

## References and Resources:

Poison Oak, University of California Statewide IPM Program, 2001, @ <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7431.html>

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