



POISON OAK

Poison oak is found along the Pacific Coast of North America including Washington, Oregon and California, and along the Atlantic Coast. Poison oak can grow as a dense shrub in open sunlight or a climbing vine in shaded areas. The three leaflets have scalloped edges resembling the leaves of a true oak and can be bronze, bright green, yellow-green or reddish depending on the season. The plant can produce greenish-white or tan berries.

Urushiol (ooh-roo-she-all) is oil found in **all parts** of the poison oak plant. It binds to the skin within 10-20 minutes. At that point, the oil becomes extremely difficult to get off the skin with soap and water. The rash from poison oak is an allergic reaction to the oil. The rash can begin within a few hours after contact, and up to five days later. The rash can last for up to a month in some cases.



All parts of the plant contain urushiol and can cause an allergic reaction. Touching anything that has the oil on it can cause an allergic reaction such as touching gardening tools, sporting equipment, clothes, and even a pet's fur. Urushiol can be carried in the smoke from burning leaves or brush. **Never burn the plant!** Avoid breathing the smoke. If you think you have inhaled the oils, see your physician immediately; this can be a very serious condition.

To reduce the risk of exposure to the oil, use a skin-care product designed to block the oil. These products usually contain bentoquatam. This helps prevent the skin from absorbing the oil, which causes the rash. Wear long pants, long sleeves, boots, and gloves even when you apply a skin-care barrier. Clothes must be immediately washed with hot water and detergent to avoid additional contamination.

Workers who have come in contact with poison oak should:

- Immediately rinse skin with rubbing alcohol, specialized poison plant washes, degreasing soap (such as dishwashing soap) or detergent, and lots of water. Rinse frequently so that wash solutions do not dry on the skin and further spread the oil.
- Apply wet compresses, calamine lotion, or hydrocortisone cream to the skin to reduce itching and blistering. Do not scratch, as scratching can cause an infection. If blisters open, do not remove the overlying skin, as the skin can protect the raw wound underneath and prevent infection. An antihistamine such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl) can be taken to help relieve itching.
- In severe cases or if the rash is on the face or genitals, seek professional medical attention.
- **Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room if the worker is suffering a severe allergic reaction, such as swelling or difficulty breathing, or has had a severe reaction in the past.**

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants>

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