

POISON OAK

WHAT IS POISON OAK?

Poison Oak (*Toxicofrendon diversilobum*) is neither an oak, nor poisonous. The plant can grow almost anywhere along the West Coast, and can be difficult to identify due to its various forms (shrub, vine, or ground cover), and its changeable seasonal appearance. The old adage, “with leaves of three, let it be” can be helpful, as the shiny oak shaped leaves grow in clusters of three. Green in spring, red in fall, and leafless in winter, the plant can transmit its oil, *urishol*, in any season. Indirect contact, through pets, clothes, tools, and furniture, can also spread the oil. Forest fires and camp fires containing branches of poison oak plants can also cause rashes and respiratory reactions. Allergic reactions to poison oak range from mild redness to an extremely itching and oozing rash. Reactions can last for weeks. Any symptoms of wheezing, shortness of breath or severely swollen eyes require immediate medical attention.

HOW CONTAGIOUS IS IT?

Contact with *urishol* is the only way to spread poison oak. If you have washed yourself and your clothes, tools, and pets thoroughly after exposure, no further spreading of the oil can take place. Many people will notice, however, that the rash involves new areas of skin as the days wear on. This is because skin areas that are less heavily exposed or less sensitive will continue to break out. The fluid from blistering is sterile fluid and does not contain any *urishol*, so it cannot spread the rash. Occasionally re-exposure from contaminated tools or clothes can cause new outbreaks.

PREVENTION

Avoiding contact with poison oak is the best prevention. Learn about the plant’s appearance and steer clear of it. Stay on the trails in the forest (do not “bushwhack” your way through). Wear long sleeves, long pants, and closed shoes with socks. There are barrier creams that can be applied to the skin before exposure, and special cleaners to wash with (e.g. Tecnu products) after suspected exposure. Prompt removal of oils from the skin is essential. Soap and water can be effective, and alcohol wipes can be carried in a pocket or day pack. Since the oil can be active for 30 days, tools, pets, clothes and furniture must be properly cleaned to prevent further spread of the oil.

TREATMENT

In the early stages of a reaction, cool, wet compresses and ibuprofen help reduce swelling. Itching can be relieved by oral antihistamines, such as Benadryl (diphenhydramine hydrochloride--generic), which are available without a prescription. Hydrocortisone creams are also available over the counter, though stronger prescription products may be necessary. Do not open blistered skin. If blisters open, try to keep them clean and dry to avoid infection from bacterial contamination. Burow’s solution (available over the counter) can be soothing and helps dry up secretions. With a widespread reaction, a bath with colloidal oatmeal (available in drug stores) can be very soothing. In cases where much of the body is involved, or if facial swelling occurs, doctors often prescribe an oral cortisone. As these medications have the potential for serious complications, they are to be avoided unless necessary. Difficulty in breathing may be treated with systemic cortisone and a medicated inhaler. If you are uncertain as to the severity of your case, we advise a medical consultation.