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Taking the Itch Out of Poison Ivy

Which remedies work, and which should be avoided.
By Kelly Ann Butterbaugh

The simplest solution to the itchy after-effects of poison ivy is to avoid the plant, but to the 10 to 50 million Americans suffering from rashes each year, this isn’t so easy. Home remedies aren’t any easier either, since some remedies cause more harm than help. So what really works? And more important, why does it work?

Identifying the Culprit

The three types of poison common throughout the United States are poison oak (Rhus diversiloba), poison sumac (Rhus vernix), and poison ivy (Rhus radicans). All belong to the Anacardiaceae family. Poison oak and poison ivy grow three leaves per stem while poison sumac has seven to thirteen leaflets per stem.

Unknown to many is that it’s not the plant that causes the rash; it’s the urushiol oil present in the plant’s sap that causes the allergic reaction. Vaguely yellow in color, the sap will flow from any broken, crushed, or bent part of the poison plant, and even trace amounts can cause the skin’s allergic reaction. Often animals carry the oil on their fur, transferring it to humans through touch.

Because the poison rash is an allergic reaction, some people react more severely than others. Tolerance decreases with each exposure, and those who experience severe reactions most likely have been repeatedly exposed to the plant.
Preventing the Problem

The key to prevention is to avoid contact with the urushiol. While outdoors, wear protective clothing and thick garden gloves. Avoid touching bare skin with the gloves, as urushiol is easily carried on fabrics.

Try to work outside during cooler weather. Hot weather not only opens pores, which allows further oil absorption, but also causes sweat that can act as a transporter of the oil to other areas of the skin. Similarly, hot showers and baths also open pores. After being around poison, wash the exposed areas with cool water and soap. Be careful not to spread the oil onto towels or other surrounding surfaces, and wash all clothes in hot water after working outside. The oil is resilient and can last for months, causing a later reaction.

Michael P. Zimring, M.D., Director for the Center for Wilderness and Travel Medicine at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland, and author of Healthy Travel: Don’t Travel Without It advises, “It is important to note that if you wash off the urushiol or the resin that contacts your skin within 10 to 20 minutes after exposure, you might avoid an allergic reaction unless you are highly sensitized to urushiol.”

Contrary to popular belief, the blisters caused by the rash do not further spread the rash: though they may seem like they do. Thicker skin absorbs and reacts differently than more sensitive areas, meaning areas such as the palms may show the rash hours if not days later than areas such as the inner arms. That, partnered with the spread of urushiol through clothes and other fibers’ contact, can make the rash seem like it’s spreading through the exposed blisters.

“Your skin has natural enzymes that break the urushiol down over four hours, so the rash you see of poison ivy really represents the areas of skin that were touched, and then retouched other areas during the first four hours until the oil itself is no longer able to act as an allergen. ... After that, it really can’t spread, and the fluid in blisters doesn’t spread the condition either,” says Charles E. Crutchfield III.
Taking the Itch Out

M.D., Clinical Associate Professor of Dermatology at the University of Minnesota Medical School and medical director of Crutchfield Dermatology.

Dr. Adelaide A. Hebert, Professor of Dermatology and Pediatrics at the University of Texas-Houston Medical School also adds, “Many patients (and many physicians) do not realize that scratching the blisters is not what spreads the poison ivy. Rather, it is the original contact with the urushiol that causes the reaction. One can touch poison ivy once and still break out in new areas over the course of the next two to three weeks.”

When Relief Is Harmful

Home remedies span from logical and harmless to irrational and hurtful. One harmful plan is to apply caustic products to the skin to “draw out the itch.” Solutions made with products such as bleach are dangerous and should never be applied to the skin. Similarly, hot water will only injure the skin and open pores—two things that will further the degree of the allergic reaction.

Scratching the area is the most common action. While it’s difficult to control, scratching can invite infection and damage healing skin. Instead, try to calm the itch.

“The most effective home remedy is over-the-counter hydrocortisone one percent cream,” advises Dr. Crutchfield. While they may seem like a good idea, avoid using other over-the-counter medications for the rash. Antihistamines, anesthetics, or antibiotic creams should be avoided.

“Dermatologists typically do not recommend Lanacaine or Neosporin because they contain potential skin sensitizers. Applying an agent like this to broken skin may allow enhanced penetration and greater absorption. Neomycin is the ingredient in Neosporin that can cause an allergic reaction. Many individuals in the United States are allergic to this ingredient,” says Dr. Hebert, who was suffering from a case of poison ivy at the time.

Stopping the Itch—the Right Way

There are safe measures for relieving the discomfort of poison. The easiest is to apply cool compresses that will relieve the itching by lessening the inflammation that causes it. Aloe vera gel or ice packs work well without causing further damage.

A variety of skin soothing lotions can also be applied to the skin. The common pink calamine lotion works well, as does a home mixture of buttermilk, vinegar, and salt in equal portions. A paste made of baking soda mixed with water will also relieve the itching.

If applied within the first few hours of exposure, a mixture of half isopropyl rubbing alcohol and half vinegar, the key ingredients found in most poison ivy soaps, may help wash away urushiol. Follow this with a wash in cool, soapy water.

Some plants can sooth the rash as well, and while they may not work 100 percent, they also are not harmful to try. Aloe plants will cool the skin and relieve the itch. Jewelweed, also known as touch-me-not (Impatiens capensis), has a jellylike sap that can be spread onto the skin.

When to See the Doctor

Most poison ivy rash can be treated at home; however, there are times when medical help is needed. If the rash has spread over what seems to be the entire body, the swelling and blisters are on the face or near the eyes, or an infection is suspected, more than a home remedy is needed. In some cases breathing may become difficult, especially if the plant was burned sending urushiol into the air. If breathing is laborious, visit the emergency room immediately.

While benign home remedies might work for some and not for others, it is important to care for the damaged skin. Harmless if tried and precious if effective, these remedies just might give some relief to the otherwise maddening itch of poison ivy.