

# The POISON in POISON IVY

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## What is Poison Ivy?

Poison ivy is a plant in the toxicodendron genus that can cause an intense rash when it comes into contact with exposed skin. The reaction is called “allergic contact dermatitis” because it is actually due to an allergy that most people have to the plants in the toxicodendron genus. Other plants in this family are poison oak and poison sumac, and contact with these plants will typically give the same response as contact with poison ivy. All of the plants in the toxicodendron genus contain oil called urushiol, and it is contact with the oil that causes the skin reaction. The urushiol oil is only released from the plant when it is damaged in some way (such as breaking or crushing the plant), so skin reactions typically occur when the patient has been sitting, kneeling or lying in it.

## What Are the Signs of a Poison Ivy Rash?

The poison ivy rash will begin as intense itching and swelling in the area that came into contact with the urushiol. The rash will then progress to form fluid-filled blisters that will eventually break open and crust over. The fluid in the blisters does not contain the urushiol oil and will not spread the rash. After the blisters have crusted over, they will dry up and heal. It will take 14-21 days for the rash to fully heal.

## What Can I Do to Prevent Poison Ivy?

Patients should first learn what poison ivy looks like. Typically poison ivy will appear as a scrambling shrub or vine that has large leaves with a hairy underside. There are usually three leaves per stem, with the central leaf growing directly out of the stem. Remember the old adage “leaves of three, let it be.” Once you know how to identify poison ivy, it will be much easier to avoid it. Homeowners can try to remove patches of poison ivy from their yard to avoid exposure. In areas likely to have poison ivy, wearing clothes that cover all exposed skin will act as a barrier for the urushiol. There is also a lotion available that acts as a barrier against poison ivy. Bantoquatam (Ivy-Block®) can be applied to exposed skin and will physically block the urushiol from absorbing into the skin. This product should be applied 15 minutes before exposure is likely to occur and must be reapplied every four hours.



The lotion must be shaken vigorously before application and dries with a white film that some patients find undesirable. After the potential exposure is over, the lotion should be washed off with soap and water.

## How Do I Treat Poison Ivy?

The most important step in treating poison ivy is to completely wash the exposed area as quickly as possible. The urushiol oil can absorb into the skin in as little as 10 minutes, so the faster the oil is removed the less damage it is going to do. In some cases, washing within 10 minutes can prevent the rash from occurring. Once the urushiol is absorbed into the skin, the only way to get rid of the rash is to let it run its course; there are no products that can “cure” poison ivy. All clothing, shoes, outerwear and sports gear that may have come into contact with the poison ivy must also be washed with soap and water. Urushiol can remain active on an inanimate object for years (meaning that it will induce a poison ivy rash each time it is used), so cleaning any item that may have come into contact with urushiol is essential to prevent recontamination or spreading of the rash. Once the rash is present, the main goal is to decrease symptoms. If scratching is causing excess irritation and marking, the fingernails should be trimmed. Topical hydrocortisone can be used to help re-

lieve itching and swelling. It should be applied in a thin layer three to four times a day for up to seven days. Topical hydrocortisone can be used on open or weeping lesions, but should not be used on the eyes or eyelids. A shake lotion, like calamine lotion, can be used to help protect the skin and may also help with the itching. As the name implies, it should be shaken before use and can be applied four to six times daily as needed. Shake lotions should not be used on lesions that are open or draining, as they tend to cake and crust, preventing the fluid from draining. If there are open or draining lesions, an astringent can be used to help dry them up and remove any crusting. Astringents can be used either as soaks or as compresses and should be used for 15-30 minutes two to four times daily. Also, a cool tap water compress or soak can help soothe skin and remove excess crusting. If these self-treatment measures do not provide enough relief, a physician may be contacted to obtain prescription products. Topical antihistamines (such as diphenhydramine, or Benadryl®) and topical anesthetics (such as benzocaine or lidocaine) should not be used on poison ivy because these products are known to be irritating to this kind of rash. Antihistamines taken by mouth can be used if more relief from itching is needed.

**For more information, ask your pharmacist!**

This information is provided by Michigan Pharmacists Association and: