

Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac

(Allergic Contact Dermatitis)

DESCRIPTION

Your child has extremely itchy streaks or patches of redness and blisters on exposed body surfaces (such as hands). The rash appears 1-2 days after your child was exposed outside.

CAUSE

Poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac cause the same type of rash and are found throughout North America. More than 50% of people are sensitive to the oil of these plants.

EXPECTED COURSE

The rash usually lasts 2 weeks. Treatment reduces the symptoms but does not cure the rash. The best approach is prevention.

HOME TREATMENT

- 1) **Cool soaks.** Soak the area with the rash in cold water or massage it with an ice cube for 20 minutes as often as necessary. Let it air dry after the soaking or massage. This will reduce itching and oozing.
- 2) **Steroid creams.** If applied early, a steroid cream can reduce the itching. The sores should be dried up and no longer itchy in 10 to 14 days. In the meantime, cut your child's fingernails short and encourage him or her not to scratch.
- 3) **Steroids by mouth.** In severe cases, your doctor may prescribe steroids to take by mouth, especially in severe cases or cases involving the eyes or face, especially with swelling. Steroids are generally safe to use if used for short periods of time.
- 4) **Benadryl.** If itching persists, give Benadryl orally (no prescription needed) every 6 hours as needed.
- 5) **Contagiousness.** The fluid from the sores themselves is not contagious. However, oil or sap from the poisonous plant may remain on a pet's fur or on items such as clothes or shoes. The oil or sap is contagious for about a week. Be sure to wash it off clothes or pets with soap and water.
- 6) **Prevention.** Learn to recognize these plants. Poison ivy grows in all regions of the US. Poison oak grows in western and southeastern regions of the U.S. To be safe, avoid all plants with three large green leaves on each stem. Another clue is shiny black spots on damaged leaves. (The plant sap turns black when exposed to air.) Poison sumac has 7 to 13 leaves per stem, grows in swamps in the southeast U.S., and is harder to recognize. If you think your child has had contact with one of these plants, wash the exposed areas of skin with any available soap for five minutes. Do this as soon as possible because after 1 hour it is too late to prevent absorption of much of the oil into the skin. Everyone should wear long pants or socks when walking through woods that may contain poison ivy, oak, or sumac.

CALL YOUR CHILD'S PHYSICIAN DURING OFFICE HOURS IF:

- The itching becomes severe, even with treatment.
- The skin looks infected (you see pus or soft yellow scabs).
- The rash lasts longer than 2 weeks.