

Kent County Health Department Poison Ivy Fact Sheet



What is poison ivy?

Poison ivy is a plant found in all 50 states. It usually grows as a climbing vine. It can also grow as a small shrub or even large enough to resemble a tree. Poison ivy grows with clusters of three leaflets. The center leaf has a longer stem. Blossoms appear in the spring. The leaves may be reddish and a variety of shapes. Berries may form at the base of the plant.

Poison ivy is found in the woods, along roadsides, and in clearings. All parts of the plant, except the pollen, produce urushiol. This is a substance to which most people are extremely sensitive. Sensitivity may develop after one, two, or even dozens of exposures, so it is never safe to assume that you are immune. Urushiol can also be transferred to people from pets' fur, clothing and shoes, firewood, gardening tools, and even hands.

How is poison ivy spread?

Poison ivy is not contagious. The rash is spread only by the invisible sap on the skin and **NOT** by leaking blister fluid from the rash itself. The reason the rash often continues to break out in new areas is that people unknowingly continue to get it from unwashed clothes (especially shoes and laces), sports equipment, gardening equipment and pets.

What are the symptoms of poison ivy?

- Itching
- A burning, red rash lasting one to three weeks
- Oozing blisters which crust over within two to three weeks

The Health Department does not diagnosis poison ivy.

How is poison ivy treated?

Once you have the rash, it lasts one to four weeks. Treatment is directed at the itching and shrinking your rash. Treating the itching is important since scratching can lead to skin infection. Fingernails should be clipped short!

- Antihistamines are available to relieve itching.
- Drying agents like calamine or other lotions can be very soothing.
- Cool soaks in baking soda or oatmeal for 15-30 minutes can relieve itching for several hours at a time.

Should I see the doctor?

Here are some reasons you may want to see a doctor:

- Facial or genital involvement – the skin in these areas is easily damaged and scarred.
- Involvement of large areas of skin – ten percent of the body's surface, or about the size of the entire stomach, is too large to self-treat.
- Signs of infection – these include pain and tenderness, growing redness around the rash, or pus. Clear or slightly yellow transparent fluid is common from poison ivy blisters and is not a sign of infection.
- Extreme itching – itching which disturbs sleep or normal daily activities despite using over the counter treatments should be treated by a doctor.

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Do I need to keep my child home from school?

Poison ivy is not contagious. Therefore, your child does not need to be kept home from school.

How is poison ivy prevented?

- Avoid contact with the plant - remember “leaves of three, let it be”.
- Apply a coating of a protective cream, such as Stokogard Outdoor Cream, if entering areas where these plants grow.
- Wear long pants and long sleeves in growth areas.
- Do not burn poison ivy. Doing that releases urushiol into the air and inflames the skin.
- Wash skin with Fells Naphtha soap.
- Poison ivy can be neutralized if washed within 15 minutes of exposure.
- Wash clothes, shoes, sports equipment and anything you might have touched.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about poison ivy or think you may have it, call your health care provider.