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Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac

What is poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac?

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

The rash is extremely itchy and can have streaks or patches of redness and blisters on exposed body surfaces (such as the hands). The rash appears 1 or 2 days after your child has been exposed to the plant in a forest or field.

How long does it last?

The rash usually lasts 2 weeks. Treatment helps the symptoms but does not cure the rash.

How can I take care of my child?

- **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.
- **Steroid creams** If applied early, a steroid cream can reduce the itching. Your child's cream is _____. Put the cream on the area with the rash _____ times a day for _____ days. 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 not to scratch himself.
- **Oral steroids** Severe or widespread poison ivy requires oral steroids to bring it under control. Your child's steroid is _____. Give _____ every _____ hours for _____ days.
- **Benadryl** If itching persists, give Benadryl orally (no prescription needed). Your child's dose is _____. Give it every 6 hours as needed.
- **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 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.

How can I help prevent the rash?

- Learn to recognize these plants. Poison ivy grows in all regions of North America. Poison oak grows in western North America and the southeastern region 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 5 minutes. Strong laundry soap has no added benefits. 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.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call 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.
 - You have other concerns or questions.
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