



Public Works Tool Box Talk

Poisonous Plants

A number of Public Works employees are involved in “woody” outdoor activities both at home and on the job. If you are off the beaten path, you should be able to recognize one of the most common causes of allergic contact dermatitis in the United States– Poison Ivy & Poison Sumac

Poison Ivy can be found as a vine twining on tree trunks or straggling over the ground, or as dwarf shrubby plant or ground cover that comes back from perennial roots each spring. Leaves are always grouped in sets of three leaflets with each mature leaflet two to four inches in length and pointed at the tip. Leaf stems supporting each set of three leaflets are arranged alternately rather than in pairs across from each other.



Poison Sumac can be found in places that are wet such as swamps, bogs, and moist ditches. It is a tall shrub or small tree with 6-12 leaflets arranged in pairs, and an additional single leaflet at the end. Small yellowish green flowers mature into whitish green fruits. Non-poisonous sumac species have leaves similar to those of poison sumac, but the non-poisonous species have red fruits.

How can I get it? Poison ivy and poison sumac have a poisonous sap (urushiol) in their roots, stems, leaves and fruit. The sap is released when the plant is bruised. The sap may be deposited on the skin by direct contact with the plant or by contact with contaminated objects, such as shoes, clothing, tools and animals and then transferred to the skin. Even the dead plants are poisonous. (Never burn them! Smoke and ash can carry toxins to the skin causing a rash. Inhaling the smoke can be worse.)

Can I wash it off? Usually within 15 minutes of contact, the urushiol binds to skin proteins. If it is washed off with soap and water before that time, a reaction may be prevented. After that however, it cannot be washed off or transferred to other areas.



How can I treat it? About 15 percent of the 120 million Americans who are allergic to poison ivy and poison sumac are so highly sensitive that they break out in a rash and begin to swell in 4 to 12 hours instead of the normal 24 to 48. Their eyes may swell shut and blisters may erupt on their skin. They need to get treatment as soon as possible. Physicians may administer or prescribe corticosteroids to bring the swelling down.

Can I spread it by scratching? Approximately 24 to 36hrs after exposure, a blistering, itching rash develops. Scratching or oozing blister fluid cannot spread the rash to other areas of the body or to other persons. New lesions that appear a few days after the first lesions represent less sensitive areas or areas where less urushiol was deposited. The course of the reaction usually is 12 to 15 days.

If you would like more information, contact the Workplace Safety Office or MDH.