

When your child has poison ivy

By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

Poison ivy is a rash caused by a reaction to the oil of the poison ivy plant. Poison oak and poison sumac cause similar rashes. These plants are found throughout the United States and more than 50% of people are sensitive to their oils.

The rash consists of streaks or patches of redness and blisters, which are extremely itchy. It usually erupts on exposed body surfaces, such as the hands or legs, within one or two days after exposure to a poison ivy, oak, or sumac plant. It generally lasts about two weeks. Treatment reduces the symptoms but doesn't cure the condition. The best approach is prevention.

HOME CARE

Apply cool soaks. To reduce itching, soak the involved area in cold water or massage it with an ice cube for 20 minutes as often as necessary. Then let it air dry.

Apply steroid cream. Steroid cream can also reduce itching if it is applied soon after the rash breaks out. Your child's cream is Cortaid. Apply it 2-3 times per day for 3-4 days. The rash should dry up and stop itching in ten to 14 days. In the meantime, to prevent a secondary infection, cut your child's fingernails short and encourage him not to scratch.

Take steps to keep the rash from spreading. The fluid from the rash itself is not contagious. Anything that has poison ivy oil or sap on it, however, is contagious for about one week. This includes the shoes and clothes your child was wearing when she came in

contact with the plant and any pets that have oil on their fur. Be sure to wash any items, or pets, that may have oil on them with soap and water.

Take preventive measures. Teach your child to recognize poison ivy, oak, and sumac plants. Avoid all plants with three large, shiny, green leaves. Another, clue is the presence of shiny black spots on damaged leaves. (The sap of the plant turns black when exposed to air.) The poison ivy plant can cause a rash even after the leaves turn red in the fall.

Have your child wear long pants and socks when walking through woods, fields, or any other area that may contain poison ivy, oak, or sumac. If you think your child may have been in contact with one of these plants, wash exposed areas of skin several times with any available soap. Do this as soon as possible since washing is of little value in preventing absorption of the oil into the skin after one hour. Avoid burning these plants because the smoke can cause a severe respiratory reaction.

Call our office during regular hours if:

- The rash spreads to the face, eyes, or lips.
- The itching interferes with sleep.
- Any big blisters develop.
- The rash becomes open and oozing.
- Signs of infection occur, such as pus or soft yellow scabs.
- The rash lasts more than two weeks.
- You have other concerns or questions.

DR. SCHMITT is Director of General Consultative Services, The Children's Hospital of Denver, and Professor of Pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine. He is a member of the Editorial Board of Contemporary Pediatrics.

Adapted from Schmitt BD: Your Child's Health, ed 2. New York, Bantam Books, Inc., 1991.

This parent information aid on poison ivy may be photocopied and distributed to parents without permission of the publisher.

Please call with any questions or concerns
Brighton Hill Pediatrics
151 Intrepid Lane
Syracuse, NY 13205
Phone: (315) 469-8191
Fax: (315) 410-2029
www.bhpeds.com