POISON IVY AND ITS COUSINS

The poison ivy plant is the bane of millions of campers, hikers, gardeners, and others who enjoy the great outdoors. So are its cousins: poison oak and poison sumac. Approximately 85 percent of the population will develop an allergic reaction if exposed to poison ivy, oak or sumac. Usually, people develop a sensitivity to poison ivy, oak or sumac only after several encounters with the plants. However, sensitivity may occur after only one exposure.

The cause of the rash, blisters, and infamous itch is "urushiol." It is a chemical in the sap of these poisonous plants. Because urushiol is inside the plant, brushing against an intact plant will not cause a reaction. But undamaged plants are rare. Stems or leaves broken by the wind or by animals, and even the tiny holes made by chewing insects can release urushiol.

Reactions, treatments, and preventive measures are the same for all three plants. Avoiding direct contact with the plants reduces the risk but doesn't guarantee against a reaction. Urushiol can stick to pets, garden tools, balls, or anything it comes in contact with. If the urushiol isn't washed off those objects or animals, just touching them could cause a reaction in a susceptible person.

Urushiol that's rubbed off the plants onto other things can remain potent for years, depending on the environment. If the contaminated object is in a dry environment, the potency of the urushiol can last for decades. Even if the environment is warm and moist, the urushiol could still cause a reaction a year later.

Almost all parts of the body are vulnerable to the sticky urushiol. Because the urushiol must penetrate the skin to cause a reaction, places where the skin is thick, such as the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands, are less sensitive to the sap than areas where the skin is thinner. The severity of the reaction may also depend on how big a dose of urushiol the person gets.

Urushiol can penetrate the skin within minutes. There is no time to waste if you know that you have been exposed. The earlier you cleanse the skin, the greater the chance that you can remove the urushiol before it gets through the skin. Cleansing may not stop the initial rash if more than 10 minutes has elapsed. However, it can help prevent the rash from spreading further.

If you've been exposed to poison ivy, oak or sumac, stay indoors until you complete the first two steps: cleanse exposed skin, and apply generous amounts of rubbing alcohol. Don't go near plants the same day. Alcohol removes your skin's protection along with the urushiol. Any new contact will cause the urushiol to penetrate twice as fast.