

Poison Ivy, Oak, and Sumac: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments

Poison ivy, oak, and sumac are plants that on contact can cause a skin rash called allergic contact dermatitis. The red, itchy rash often shows up as lines or streaks and is marked by fluid-filled bumps/blisters or large raised areas (hives).

What causes the rash?

Contact with an oil (urushiol) found in poison ivy, oak or sumac causes the rash. Urushiol is an allergen, so the rash is actually an allergic reaction to the oil on these plants. Indirect contact may also cause the rash, such as when you touch clothing, pet fur, or other objects that have come in contact with one of these plants.

What are the symptoms?

- Itchy skin
- Red streaks or lines or general redness
- Small bumps or larger raised areas (hives)
- Blisters filled with fluid that sometimes leaks out.

The rash usually appears 8 to 48 hours after contact. The rash may continue to develop in new areas over several days. The rash is not contagious. You cannot catch or spread the rash even if you touch it or the fluid filled blisters.

How is the rash treated?

Initial treatment consists of washing the area with water immediately after contact with the plant. To relieve symptoms, use wet compresses, antihistamines, and calamine lotion. Moderate or severe cases may require treatment by your physician, who may prescribe a corticosteroid.

How can I prevent poison ivy, sumac, oak?

The best way to prevent the rash is to identify and avoid the plants. When contact with the plants is unavoidable, heavy clothing such as long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and gloves can be helpful along with using a barrier lotion such as Ivy Block.