

## Watch out for poison ivy!



The Rhus genus of plants – more commonly known as poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac – grow well in Maryland’s humid summer months.

These plants pose a significant occupational problem to a diverse group of workers, such as those in highway maintenance, construction, utilities, and agriculture. It is also a problem for landscapers, nurserymen, and forestry workers.

The most common way to get poison ivy, or more specifically, “allergic plant dermatitis,” is to come in direct contact with the plant, but the rash can also be acquired from exposure to the smoke of burning plants. Interestingly, poison ivy and other plants do not release an allergen until the leaf is injured, such as when being mowed or pulled from the ground or from around a structure. Once injured,



however, the sap in the leaf is highly allergenic for many people.

The sap can also stick to pets, garden tools, or anything else it comes in contact with. If it isn’t washed off immediately, you can actually re-infect yourself when you touch your pets or garden tools again. In addition, the sap that’s rubbed off the poison ivy plant onto other things can remain potent for years.

The poison ivy rash appears within 24 to 48 hours of exposure to the sap. It can appear as a pattern of red streaks or

blotches on the skin, and is accompanied by intense itching.

Obviously, common sense prevails in avoiding contact with poison ivy and poisonous plants when working outdoors. Wearing protective clothing and covering all parts of the body, including arms and legs, is very effective. Learning to recognize these plants helps, too. Poison ivy grows virtually everywhere in the moist, humid climate of Maryland. It has a woody, ropelike vine. It grows either as a vine or a shrub. Normally, it has three leaflets (groups of leaves all on the same small stem coming off the larger main stem), but may vary from groups of three to nine leaves. The leaves are bright green in the summer and bright red in the fall. It also may have yellow or green flowers and white berries.

If you are exposed to poison ivy, Dr. William L. Epstein, Professor of Dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco, suggests doing the following within the first 10 minutes to help prevent further spread of the rash:

- 1) Cleanse the exposed skin with rubbing alcohol;
- 2) Wash skin with water;
- 3) Shower with soap and warm water;
- 4) Finally, all clothes, shoes, tools, and other things that have come in contact with the poison ivy oils should be wiped off with alcohol and water. Be sure to wear gloves or otherwise cover your hands while doing this and then discard the hand covering.

If you get the rash anyway, don’t worry. It’s not life-threatening; just very uncomfortable. The rash and itch usually disappear in 14 to 20 days. Many over-the-counter lotions are available for the itch, such as Burrow’s Solution™, baking soda, Aveeno™ oatmeal bath, calamine, and zinc oxide. Those with severe reactions including blistering should seek the help of their doctor.



## The hazards of sun exposure

Sunlight contains ultraviolet (UV) radiation, which causes premature aging of the skin as well as wrinkles, cataracts, and skin cancer.

There are no safe UV rays or safe suntans.

Be especially careful outdoors if you burn easily, spend a lot of time outdoors, or have numerous, irregular, or large moles; freckles; fair skin; or blond, red, or light brown hair.

Here’s how to block those harmful rays:

- Cover up. Wear lightly woven clothing that you can’t see through.
- Use sunscreen. A sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 blocks 93% of UV rays. Be sure to follow application directions on the bottle or tube.
- Wear a hat. A wide brim hat, not a baseball cap, works best because it protects the neck, ears, eyes, forehead, nose, and scalp.
- Wear UV-absorbent shades. Sunglasses don’t have to be expensive, but they should block 99 to 100 percent of UVA and UVB radiation. Before you buy, read the product tag or label.
- Limit your exposure. UV rays are most intense between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

