

POISON IVY AND DERMATITIS

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is probably the most common plant in the Euclid Creek watershed noted for its capacity for causing a inflammation of the skin (allergic contact dermatitis) more commonly known as a rash. The inflammation is actually caused by an oily sap found in every part of the poison ivy plant; leaves, flowers, fruits, and stems including aerial and subterranean roots. That oily sap is called **urushi-ol**. It is the same chemical found in poison sumac and poison oak and between 50% and 75% of all people will have an allergic response to the oily sap when exposed to it.

IDENTIFICATION Poison ivy is very easy to identify correctly. Contrary to axiom that states “leaves of three, let them be” you need a little more detail to correctly identify poison ivy. Actually most three-leaved plants are completely harmless. But if you have a three-leaved plant with a neck (a short stem connecting the terminal leaflet to the other two leaflets) and two other leaflets without stems connected to the main stem you’ve made a correct identification. Features such as color of the leaves, the texture of leaves and whether or not they have lobes or teeth are not reliable features in making a correct identification. A better axiom would be “looks like me (head, neck, arms and torso), let it be.”

PREVENTION Knowing how to identify poison ivy is the first step in prevention. Once you know what to look for avoiding infecting is fairly simple. Wear clothing that covers your body and gloves on you hands. Make sure all exposed skin is covered. The only way you will get a rash from poison ivy is if you come in direct contact with its oily sap. Usually infections come from live plants but urushiol, the oil that causes the rash, can be picked up by touching anything which has the oil on it such as clothing or pet fur. It can even be inhaled if poison ivy plants are burned and the fumes are inhaled. The oily sap can remain an active threat for several years on anything coming in contact with it like shoes, boots, and garden tools. The good news is that even if you know you’ve come in contact with poison ivy you can still prevent the rash from developing. As soon as possible after exposure wash the effected area with any soap. Dawn is a good choice since it is know for its ability to remove oily debris. Be sure when washing to use friction from a wash clothe and repeat the washing three times to the effected area. If you get rid of the oily soon enough you won’t get the rash.

SYMPTOMS OF POISON IVY RASH The symptoms of poison ivy rash can be felt in as little as a few hours but can sometimes take up to 5 days before showing. When one is first exposed to urushiol there is usually no reaction. It normally develops after the second and/or subsequent exposures. Symptoms include; (1) redness and itching of the skin, (2) streaks or patches of rash where there has been direct contact, and (3) red bumps (known as papules) which can develop into large, oozing blisters.

TREATMENT FOR POISON IVY RASH The itchy rash cannot be cured. It has to run its full course which usually lasts from 5 to 12 days. But the symptoms can be treated. Many find that cold showers and/or the application of calamine lotion reduces the itching. Antihistamines do not help. There are some products which are reported to lessen the time it takes for the rash and blister to dry. Exposure to the eyes, nose and mouth may require prescription medications such as prednisone to help control the symptoms. Touching the fluid from a broken blister will not cause the rash to spread since it does not contain urushiol but breaking should be avoided to prevent infection.

