



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Poison Oak

Poison oak is a plant that is common in California. It contains poison in its leaves, berries, and roots, and can cause an allergic skin reaction. While it has no effect on some people, it can cause itching and painful rashes and blisters on others.

Poison oak is not related to the oak tree but is related to poison ivy, a plant not found in California. It's usually a low-growing shrub with three leaves that look a bit like small oak tree leaves. The berries of poison oak are white and small.

After exposure to poison oak, severe skin irritation can result. In a matter of days, there is usually reddening and itching on the hands, neck, face, legs, or whatever parts of the body have been exposed. Small blisters form and grow larger, eventually filling with a watery fluid. The skin then becomes crusty and dry. These symptoms disappear without treatment after a few weeks.

While some people can develop this reaction from a brush fire containing poison oak, or from clothing or pets that have touched it, a person who has developed a rash cannot spread it to another person.

Of course, the best way to prevent a reaction to poison oak is to stay away from anything that looks like it. Wear protective clothing when you are out in the woods where it may be growing, and try to keep pets out of areas where it may be growing. In addition, it's sometimes possible to avoid a reaction by washing your skin within 30 minutes after contact. Lather your skin with soap and water and rinse the soap off in running water several times. Also, wash your dog, your clothing, or anything else that may have come in contact with it.

If you develop an itchy rash from poison oak, you can relieve the itching in a number of ways. Apply calamine lotion or a one percent hydrocortisone cream, which is available without a prescription. Do this twice a day. However, use hydrocortisone cream sparingly on facial rashes. Ice and cold compresses provide rapid, temporary relief. An antihistamine such as Benadryl can be purchased over-the-counter and can also provide some help for itching.

If your reaction is severe, call your health care professional. He or she may prescribe a stronger cortisone preparation, which may be taken by mouth, applied as a lotion, or given by injection in the doctor's office.

You should also call if signs of infection develop, such as pain, swelling, or tenderness; heat and redness; discharge of pus; or a fever of 100 degrees or higher.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at www.kaiserpermanente.org/california, then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

© 1998, The Permanente Medical Group, Inc.

REGIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION