

# Prevention

## How to Get Rid of a Poison Ivy Rash Fast, According to Doctors

Plus, exactly how to identify one of these pesky plants.



By [Korin Miller](#) Jul 20, 2020



Having more time to explore nature is a sweet perk of summer, but dealing with a poison ivy rash that pops up after trekking through greenery isn't the ideal way to end your outdoor adventures.

Poison ivy is found in most parts of the U.S., except Alaska, Hawaii, and parts of the West Coast, according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). It can grow as either a vine or a small shrub that trails along the ground, and it can climb on low plants, trees, and poles. Poison ivy is usually identified by its three shiny leaves that bud from one small stem, the FDA says.

But here's the tricky part: Poison ivy can change color. Its leaves are reddish in the spring, green in the summer, and yellow, orange, or red in the fall. It can also have greenish-white flowers and whitish-yellow berries.



So, what should you do if you come into contact with this pesky plant? Below, doctors explain the best treatment for a poison ivy rash, how long you can expect it to last, and when it's time to rope in your doctor for reinforcements.

## **Why does poison ivy cause a rash?**

Poison ivy, oak, and sumac all contain an oil called urushiol that most people are allergic to, according to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). As a result, pretty much everyone who comes into contact with these plants develops a rash anywhere between a few hours to three weeks after exposure (depending on whether or not you have been exposed to it before).

“Poison ivy causes an allergic contact dermatitis, which means that your immune system becomes sensitized to the urushiol and mounts an inflammatory response,” says Joshua Zeichner, M.D., director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. “This translates to a red, itchy rash that may become extensive or even lead to blistering in severe cases.”

## **What does a poison ivy rash look like?**



Poison ivy can cause red, itchy, blistery bumps to form on the skin, and they're not usually in any particular pattern, says **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City.

The rash tends to mimic the way you came into contact with the poison ivy. For example, if you brushed along the plant, it could leave a rash in a line on your skin. "New blisters may continue to appear for up to two weeks," Dr. Goldenberg says. "The areas with most exposure appear first and those with least exposure appear later."

## **What does a poison ivy rash feel like? Is it contagious?**

It's mostly very itchy. The AAD says that the itch can be so intense that it can wake you up while you're sleeping. "Some patients may experience skin burning and pain," Dr. Goldenberg says.

While severe allergic reactions to poison ivy can happen, they're "more rare," adds Purvi Parikh, M.D., an allergist with Allergy & Asthma Network. The following symptoms are a sign of a severe reaction and require immediate medical care:

- Difficulty breathing or swallowing
- A rash around one or both eyes, your mouth, or on your genitals
- Swelling on your face, especially if an eye swells shut
- Itching that worsens or makes it impossible to sleep
- Rashes on most of your body
- A fever

While the rash is not contagious itself, you can still develop a rash if you touch another person's skin or clothing while the oil from the poison ivy is still on it.

## The best treatment for a poison ivy rash

If you know you came into contact with poison ivy, the AAD recommends taking off the clothes you were wearing and thoroughly washing them. Then, rinse your skin with lukewarm, soapy water to wash off the urushiol. If it's not washed off, the oil can spread from person to person and to other areas of your body that weren't originally exposed to the plant, Dr. Zeichner says.

After that, there's only so much you can do to speed up the rash's healing process. "The rash usually resolves in three to four weeks without treatment," Dr. Goldenberg says.

However, there are some home remedies that can help make you more comfortable while the poison ivy rash heals:

✓ **Take short oatmeal or baking soda baths.** The AAD recommends soaking in a lukewarm bath with a colloidal oatmeal preparation (you can find it at your local drugstore or online) to help with the itch. Adding one cup of baking soda to running water in a bath can also help relieve the need to scratch. This is important, as incessant itching can break the skin and raise your risk of infection.

✓ **Use calamine lotion or hydrocortisone cream.** Calamine lotion can offer itch relief, Dr. Goldenberg says. And, if you have a mild case, applying hydrocortisone cream or lotion can also help.

✓ **Apply cool compresses to the rash.** Wet a clean washcloth with cold water, wring it out, and apply it to your skin to help soothe the area.

✓ **Take an antihistamine.** If you know you were exposed to poison ivy, Dr. Zeichner says you can take an antihistamine "right away" to try to tamp down on your body's allergic response. Long-acting antihistamines like cetirizine (Zyrtec), levocetirizine (Xyzal), and fexofenadine (Allegra) can be especially helpful, Dr. Parikh adds.

If you're incredibly itchy, have a huge rash, or just can't seem to get relief, Dr. Zeichner recommends calling your doctor for help and a proper diagnosis. Again, if you have trouble breathing or experience other signs of an extreme allergic reaction, seek medical care right away.