

Poison Ivy

A Chicago River Fact Sheet



What is poison ivy?

Poison ivy is a plant found in all parts of the United States. Most people are allergic to the oily resin or sap that is in all parts of the plant. It is an allergen to many but not to everyone.

What does poison ivy look like?

“Leaves of three, let them be” is a good rule to go by. Poison ivy usually has three green leaves on each stem. They can have a reddish look, grow close to the ground, or as vines. Dark spots on the leaves are sap that has been exposed to air. Poison ivy can have different colors and appearance at different times of the year. Hanging clusters of flowers are greenish-white to cream colored. Fruits are greenish then ripen into tan.



How do I get poison ivy?

Touching any part of the plant, or anything that has come in contact with the plant that may have the oily resin on it. For example, gardening equipment and tools, toys, pets, clothing, shoes, gardening gloves, camping equipment, and sports gear.

What are the symptoms of poison ivy?

Allergic individuals develop a skin rash (dermatitis) after coming into contact with poison ivy. The rash usually appears 24 to 48 hours after getting the oily resin on the skin, but may be delayed in some. Rashes from poison ivy can be mild to severe. The rash starts with itchy, red, irritated bumps. Fluid-filled blisters may develop and can burst. There is a risk of infection with open blisters.

What first aid and treatment is needed?

After having contact with poison ivy remove clothing and wash skin with soap and water to remove the oil. This is most effective if done in the first 15 minutes. Use a nailbrush to clean underneath fingernails. Some garden centers carry special soap that breaks down the proteins in the resin. Swab the area with isopropyl alcohol to limit the spread of the oil to other parts of the body. If a skin rash develops, apply calamine lotion, cool compresses, or over the counter corticosteroid creams to lessen itching. Oatmeal baths can also help. Avoid scratching and cover open blisters to avoid infection. If face or genitals are involved, see a doctor for evaluation. If symptoms are persistent after these treatments see a doctor.

How do I prevent coming into contact with poison ivy?

Avoid areas where poison ivy is known to grow. Be careful when cleaning lawn and garden equipment and wash clothes. The resin can stay on gloves and tools for a long time. Wash pets that get into poison ivy. Lotions are available that make a barrier on the skin and may help prevent (or at least lessen) contact with poison ivy.

How do I get rid of poison ivy?

Poison ivy is hearty and difficult to get rid of. Check with a garden center to select an herbicide that works. Herbicides are poisons too! Take safety precautions when applying them. Never burn poison ivy.

Myths & Facts

Myth: Poison ivy can be transmitted from person to person.

Fact: Poison ivy can't be caught from other people. However, oils can stay on clothes, gardening gloves, equipment, tools, shoes, pets, and other items. Touching items with the oils can produce the same skin rash as touching the poison ivy plant directly.

Myth: Only the leaves of poison ivy are poisonous.

Fact: All parts are poisonous: roots, leaves, flowers, berries, stems, vines.

Myth: Burning poison ivy is the best way to get rid of it.

Fact: Do not burn poison ivy. Inhaling the smoke from burning poison ivy can be very dangerous and cause a rash on the whole body. When burning brush make sure that no poison ivy is mixed into the brush.

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