

Poison-Oak

What is Poison-Oak?

Western poison-oak, in the form of a bushy shrub or a climbing vine, thrives throughout California. Exposure to the oily sap contained in all parts of the poison oak – roots, stem, leaves, flowers, and berries – may cause skin irritation. Between 50% and 85% of the population is allergic to poison oak.

Primary contamination results from contact with bruised or broken plant parts that release a toxic oily resin containing the chemical urushiol. Because the resin does not dissolve in water, it is difficult to wash off and it persists for a long time – clothing, cut branches, etc. may retain toxicity for years.

Symptoms and Duration

- Skin irritation characterized by redness, blistering, swelling and severe itching generally develops 1-2 days after exposure, though symptoms may appear 30 minutes to 2 weeks following exposure.
- Generally, symptoms are most severe five days after the exposure. Poison-oak cases can last anywhere from seven days to over three weeks.
- Severity of poison-oak skin reaction depends on the degree of patient sensitivity, the amount of exposure, and on which body parts are exposed. Eyes, lips, genitals and other sensitive body parts exposed to poison-oak sap will experience a more severe reaction.

How is Poison-Oak Spread?

- The only way to become a victim of poison oak is to make direct contact with the toxic resin.
- A person who has washed thoroughly and who has changed into clean clothing cannot spread poison-oak.
- Fluid in the blisters does not contain the toxic resin and does not cause poison-oak to spread.
- Scratching other body parts with contaminated fingernails can spread poison-oak.
- Touching anything contaminated with the toxic poison-oak resin may result in exposure, including tools, pets, and contaminated clothing.

Prevention

- Learn to recognize poison-oak (see reverse).
- Wear protective clothing when out in the wild.
- Keep pets from running through poison-oak.
- Never burn poison oak! Dangerous smoke causing severe symptoms in the eyes, nose, throat and lungs may result.

What to Do if You May Have Been Exposed

- **Immediately** wash the affected areas thoroughly with soap and copious amounts of **cool** water. **Washing more than 15 minutes after exposure has little impact.**
- Change clothing ASAP after exposure. Launder clothes several times before wearing.



Treatment

After immediately washing the skin with soap and copious amounts of cool water, treatment consists mainly of protecting the damaged skin, preventing infection and relieving the itching.

Cool soaks or compresses, calamine lotion, antihistamines, and hydrocortisone ointment are commonly used to abate the symptoms. Exposure to hot water increases itching.

If the case of poison-oak is severe, the patient should see a physician for more extensive treatment with stronger steroid medications.

More Information

Contact the California Poison Control System:
www.calpoison.org/public/poak.html

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Poison-Oak Identify – and Avoid!

Western poison-oak thrives throughout California. It can grow both as a dense shrub and as a vine.

The leaves are divided into 3 leaflets, 1½-4" long, with the terminal leaf on a slender stalk. The leaves have scalloped, toothed, or lobed edges – generally resembling the leaves of a true oak, though the poison-oak leaves tend to be more glossy.

Leaves are generally bright green in the spring, yellow-green to reddish in the summer, and bright red in the fall. During late spring loose clusters of greenish-white flowers form. During summer and fall, female plants produce ivory-white berries. Poison-oak is winter deciduous, so that after cold weather sets in the stems are leafless.



Summer / Spring



Fall



Winter

This brochure was produced by the Sierra Club San Diego Canyons Campaign with information from the California Poison Control System and other public sites.

Leaves of Three – Let it Be!



Sierra Club San Diego
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Identify and Avoid Poison-Oak



Sierra Club San Diego Canyons Campaign
3820 Ray Street, San Diego, CA 92104
619-284-9399 or savewetlands@cox.net
<http://sandiego.sierraclub.org/canyons>

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