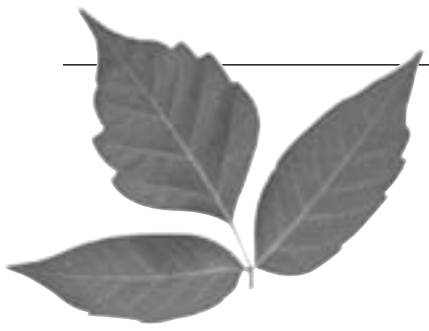


# HEALTHY LIVING



## 'Leaves of three, let them be!'

### Poison ivy can spread its pain in many ways

BY BILL HENDRICK  
Cox News Service

Be careful about that friendly little puppy you pet, the purring cat you stroke or anyone who wants to shake your hand after coming inside from a hike or gardening.

There's a decent chance they could be carriers who've come in contact with poison ivy, a plant that spreads easily and is hard to kill. It does its damage by secreting a gooey sap called urushiol (you-ROO-shee-all).

An estimated 90 percent of Americans are susceptible, and poison ivy afflicts a whopping 55 million of us each year. That includes hundreds of thousands of children who get it at camp or on hikes or riding horses or playing in the backyard.

People who take all sorts of steps to avoid getting the blistery rash, like Crystal Force, 60, of Smyrna, Ga., are surprised to learn that the plant that causes so much itching and pain is closely related to cashew and pistachio nuts, whose shells, vines and leaves also can cause severe reactions.

"I've had [poison ivy] all my life," Force said. "I'm an avid gardener, so it's inevitable I'm going to come in contact with it, though I'm always looking. I just had to ask for a dose pack [of prescription cortisone tablets] that will make it better."

Cortisone didn't exist in the days of Capt. John Smith, much to his physical irritation. The leader of the Jamestown expedition in 1609 saw poison ivy immediately and noticed it was similar to English ivy — until he touched it. Writing home, he reported it "causeth redness, itchings and lastly blisters."

Untreated, the blisters can last several weeks. And the pain, Force said, "is terrible," causing pus-filled sores that can become infected, requiring antibiotics.

Even those lucky enough to keep the oil at bay can get sick if neighbors decide to burn dead bushes or poison ivy-wrapped trees, said Atlanta dermatologist Rutledge Forney.

"Smoke from burning poison ivy can affect your lungs, cover your whole face and body, and really cause problems," Forney said. "It happens with firefighters who breathe it. It's the oil in the smoke that causes the irritation."

With summer's official start on June 21, pediatricians, dermatologists and allergists are expecting a sharp spike in the number of cases.



PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE B. TEAGLE / COX NEWS SERVICE  
Crystal Force of Smyrna, Ga., trims ivy in her yard; she wears gloves to guard against poison ivy. "I'm an avid gardener, so it's inevitable I'm going to come in contact with it, though I'm always looking."

"Poison ivy cases always rise right around now," Forney said. "Typically, the worst season is through the summer, but the danger doesn't go away then."

That's because the sap can still cause "contact allergic reactions" five years after the plants have died.

"When you come in contact with this stuff, you have about 15 minutes to wash it off with soap and water," said Dr. Dennis Spangler, head of the 17 Atlanta Allergy & Asthma Clinics in the area. "Over the next 24 to 48 hours, your body builds up a sensitivity, then a rash develops, people itch it, sores result and the only thing that works is prescription steroids."

Some doctors prescribe a five-day course of steroids, but Dr. Kathleen Sheerin, an Atlanta allergist, said that's often not long enough. She usually prescribes a two- to three-week course of Prednisone tablets daily.

"Five days will suppress it, but it may start

popping back up," she said. "If you take it longer, that's unlikely, unless you're exposed again. If you don't take steroids long enough, it would have to be a new exposure."

Poison ivy rash and blisters can't be spread from one part of the body by scratching your wrist, and then touching your leg, for example, but it should be treated quickly, Spangler said. Open sores often become infected, which then require antibiotics.

"You can rub alcohol and calamine lotion and none of that makes any difference," Spangler said. "Very mild topical steroid creams you can buy over the counter can be effective if it's really mild. But if it's worse, you'll need a prescription of Prednisone pills or a topical cream."

Dr. Mark Moncino, an Atlanta pediatrician, said he has seen "a ton" of children with painful rashes and blisters.

"If someone comes in contact with poison ivy, there are two options: Do nothing,

### HOW TO AVOID POISON IVY

- Learn what it looks like and stay away.
- Dress appropriately in woods or while gardening. Long-sleeved shirts and long pants recommended.
- Wash skin immediately when you come inside. Wash your clothes, which can expose you to the oil again.
- Dogs and cats are carriers of the poison oil. If your pets go outside, petting them is risky.
- Wash with detergent the tools, equipment, gear, toys or anything the plant or you may have touched. Be careful not to transfer urushiol to rugs, car seats or furniture.
- Sometimes, scratching can cause infections to develop within 48 hours. These might need treatment with antibiotics.
- Itching skin can be soothed with calamine lotion, Epsom salts or bicarbonate of soda. Over-the-counter corticosteroids also are effective, but only temporarily.
- If blisters form, call a physician, allergist or dermatologist. They may prescribe cortisone or other medicines.
- Over-the-counter topical hydrocortisone creams can temporarily relieve itching. Prednisone pills or injections often are prescribed by doctors.
- Rinse exposed areas within an hour with cold water, not hot. Hot water can open your pores and let the bad oil in.
- Beware of over-the-counter creams and balms that claim they can prevent poison ivy irritation. Only one cream, IvyBlock, has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration to protect the skin from rashes.

— Bill Hendrick, Cox News Service

or come in and probably leave with a prescription," he said. "Oral steroids will usually knock out [the worst of it] within 24 to 48 hours, but you've got to stay on it."

Camp counselors and others usually have learned the hard way that there's a big difference between the three-leaf plants and four-leaf clovers.

Amy Bram, director of Camp Kingfisher at the Chattahoochee Nature Center near Roswell, Ga., said workers scour camp areas, carefully removing poison ivy plants with gloves.

"We also avoid every kind of burning because you can inhale it and get quite sick from that," she said. "We tell them the old saying, 'Leaves of three, let it be,' and that's been working for us."

But what about people like birders who just can't stay out of the woods?

Birders who are looking up often step in it or touch it, so Carol Lambert, 57, past president of the Georgia Ornithological Society, strongly advises people before hikes to take plenty of water — not just for drinking, but for washing exposed areas.

"I show them what poison ivy looks like, the leaves and vines. A lot of people don't know the vines grow high on trees." ■

### AT A GLANCE

- 55 million Americans a year develop allergic reactions to poison ivy, poison sumac and poison oak; poison ivy results in 1.5 million emergency room visits a year.
- Poison ivy is a woody plant with three-leaf clusters, thus the adage, "Leaves of three, let them be." Leaves can be smooth or notched. The top of the leaves is smooth, the underneath, fuzzy. Plants produce yellow-green flowers and white berrylike fruit.
- About 90 percent of people will develop an allergic reaction to poison ivy.
- Poison ivy produces an oil called urushiol. It's found on leaves, stems and roots and flows in spring and summer. One-billionth of a gram can cause a rash.



PHOTO BY WALTER REEVES / COX NEWS SERVICE  
Leaves of five, such as Virginia creeper (left), can be left alone. Three leaves plus thorns (right) indicates a bramble, not poison ivy, which is shown in the middle.



• Poison ivy is not contagious, but the oil that causes itching can be spread by contact. If you've been exposed, don't touch anyone until

you've thoroughly cleaned yourself.

Sources: American Academy of Dermatology, American Academy of Family Physicians

### ON THE WEB:

- [www.poison-ivy.org](http://www.poison-ivy.org)
- [www.aocd.org/skin/dermatologic\\_diseases/poison\\_ivy\\_dermati.html](http://www.aocd.org/skin/dermatologic_diseases/poison_ivy_dermati.html)
- [www.kidshealth.org/teen/safety/first\\_aid/poison\\_ivy.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/safety/first_aid/poison_ivy.html)