







Poison ivy: Recognizing it, avoiding it, treating it

 [Chris Bosak](#)  15 September 2010  [Norwalk, Outdoors](#) 



The Hour's Outdoor page on Thursday includes columns about fishing, yachting and nature. Chris Bosak's For the Birds column is about the few dangers one might encounter in New England woods, including poison ivy. Visit www.thehour.com/sports/outdoors to see the columns.

We know you're itching to know more about poison ivy, so here is a release from Topical BioMedics about poison.

The first day of autumn is around the corner—a time of leaf peeping, apple picking, pumpkin carving, and brisk walks. For most Americans, it also means fall yard pickup—and along with it, an increased exposure to poison ivy. According to a report published in *Weed Science*, research indicates that poison ivy has grown much more aggressive since the 1950s, with leaf size and oil content measurably increased. This is bad news if you are one of the more than 350,000 people who are stricken by poison ivy annually.

Poison ivy tops the list of plants to avoid because it contains urushiol, an oily resin that binds to the skin on contact and may result in a hypersensitivity reaction characterized by itching, burning skin eruptions. This rash-causing poison ivy sap is a clear liquid found in the plant's leaves and the roots, which many people develop an allergy to over time.

Urushiol oil remains active for several years, so handling dead leaves or vines can cause a reaction. In addition, oil transferred from the plant to other objects—such as gardening tools, an article of clothing, or even a pet—can cause the rash when it comes in contact with human skin. If poison ivy is eaten, the mucus

lining of the mouth and digestive tract can be damaged. And if poison ivy is burned and the smoke inhaled, a rash may appear in the lining of the lungs, causing extreme pain and respiratory difficulty that may become life-threatening.

ABOUT THE PLANT

Captain John Smith was the first to describe the plant, coining the name “Poison Ivy” in 1609. Poison ivy grows throughout much of North America, and is extremely common in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and southeastern U.S. It’s typically found in wooded areas as well as exposed rocky areas and open fields, and can be recognized by its group of three leaflets on small stems coming off larger main stems. For decades parents have taught their children the sing-song phrase “leaves of three, let it be” as a way of learning to spot this pretty but toxic plant. Poison ivy also has inconspicuous greenish flowers with five petals, and berry-like fruits that are hard and whitish.

There are two types of poison ivy, the climbing variety, *Toxicodendron radicans*, and the non-climbing, *Toxicodendron rydbergii* (from the Latin *toxicum*, “poison,” and the Greek *dendron*, “tree”). Because the varieties interbreed, they look similar and sometimes grow in the same places. They also create the same allergic rash, which may last anywhere from a week to three weeks. .

Although some people are immune to poison ivy, most people develop a rash after coming in contact with the plant. After the oil has touched the skin it takes about 12 to 36 hours for redness and swelling to appear, followed by blisters and itching. Contrary to popular belief, scratching or oozing blister fluid cannot spread the outbreak or transfer it to other people. New lesions that appear a few days after a breakout of primary lesions means that there was less oil deposited on that area of the skin, or that the skin was less sensitive to it.

WINNING THE BATTLE AGAINST POISON IVY

Poison ivy’s urushiol oil is extremely potent, and only one nanogram (billionth of a gram) is needed to cause a rash. Even if you’ve never broken out you cannot assume you are immune as the more often you are exposed to urushiol, the more likely it is that you will break out with an allergic rash. In fact, upwards of 90% of the population develops an allergy to it.

You and your family can have a more enjoyable fall by following these tips for avoiding outbreaks of poison ivy, along with these helpful treatments for soothing and healing rashes if you do succumb.

Prevention:

- Avoiding contact with the plant is, of course, the best prevention. Go on an expedition, wearing long pants, a shirt with long sleeves, boots, and gloves to minimize exposure. Tour your yard, the playground, the route your children walk to school, a campsite you’re visiting, and any other outdoor areas you frequent. When you spot poison ivy, show it to your kids and instruct them to stay away from it. If you have a large amount growing in your yard, consult with a professional landscaper for removal. (Unless you are a professional, do not “weed whack” as it sprays the poison ivy—and hence the oil—right at you.)

- Prior to any outdoor activity, apply odorless, greaseless Topricin Pain Relief and Healing cream to any exposed areas of your body, including face, neck, hands, arms, etc. This will form a protective barrier making it more difficult for the urushiol oil to bond with your skin. Topricin contains natural medicines that also antidote and neutralize the adverse affect of urushiol oil. As an added plus, Topricin is the gardener's favorite for relieving all those aches and pains from doing yard work.
- Urushiol oil is extremely stable and will stay potent for years—which means you can get a rash from clothing or tools that got oil on them many seasons ago. After exposure to poison ivy, put on gloves and wipe everything you had with you and on you with rubbing alcohol and water, including shoes, tools, and clothing. Then wash clothes at least twice before wearing (if possible using bleach), hose off garden tools well, and apply leather moisturizer on footwear to prevent them from drying out (again, put on gloves).
- Pets seem to be immune from getting poison ivy, but many people do get a rash from the residual urushiol oil on their fur. Therefore it's a good idea to bath our dog or cat wearing thick rubber gloves (not latex). After washing the pet, wash yourself using cold water to keep pores closed. Consult with your veterinarian if you have any questions.

Treatment:

- Urushiol binds to skin proteins and begins to penetrate within 15 minutes of contact. If treated before that time, a reaction may be prevented. First, wash exposed site with cold water (hot water will open your pores, allowing the oil in). Follow this by bathing it in milk, which helps to get between oil and skin. Dry off well and then apply Topricin, which will help neutralize the effect of any remaining urushiol oil left on your skin.
- Wherever poison ivy grows, there is usually a plant known as jewelweed growing close by—especially in moister, shadier areas. Herbalists and Native Americans have used jewelweed for centuries to treat and speed the healing of poison ivy as it seems to be a natural remedy. When you are in the field and may have been exposed to poison ivy, pick jewelweed, slice the stem, and rub its juice on your skin to ease irritation and help prevent a breakout.
- Some companies and herbalists offer poison ivy treatment soaps that contain jewelweed and other soothing natural ingredients, such as pine tar. Soaps are available from Poison Ivy Soap Company, Burt's Bees, or search online for sources.
- Take homeopathic Rhus Tox 30X tablets to help build immunity to poison ivy.
- For severe outbreaks, or if you have any concerns whatsoever, see your doctor right away.

Lou Paradise, president and chief of research of Topical BioMedics, Inc., makers of Topricin, says, "It's a particularly strong year for poison ivy, so it's important for everyone to be aware there are ways to prevent outbreaks, or safely treat rashes and minimize the discomfort and duration should they occur." Founded in 1994 and headquartered in Rhinebeck, NY, Topical BioMedics, Inc.,

is the research and development leader in topical regulated natural medicines for pain relief. The company's flagship product, Topricin Pain Relief and Healing Cream, was introduced in 1994 and is now a leading natural therapeutic brand. All Topricin products are FDA-regulated over-the-counter medicines. Doctors and pharmacists can find more information about Topricin in the 2010 edition of the Physicians' Desk Reference (PDR). The Topical BioMedics' family of products includes Topricin original, Topricin Foot Therapy, and Topricin Junior for children, introduced in May 2009 to address the safety issues and concerns of parents and doctors in the pediatric pain relief category.

Topricin brings a soothing combination of homeopathic medicines to rapidly relieve pain and help the body heal the damage that is causing pain. Paraben- and petroleum-free, Topricin does not have any known side effects, has no contraindications, and will not interfere with any other medications. The proprietary formulas do not contain any harsh chemicals or irritants, and are greaseless and odorless, making them ideal and safe for even the most sensitive skin.

For additional information visit www.topricin.com