



Sports

Be on lookout for poison ivy as fall activities take place

Now that autumn has arrived, it's time for 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.

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.

Wear long pants, a shirt with long sleeves, boots and gloves is the best way to minimize exposure.

"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," says Lou Paradise, president and chief of research of Topical BioMedics Inc., makers of Topricin Pain Relief and Healing Cream.