Patient education: Poison ivy (The Basics)
Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is poison ivy? — Poison ivy is a plant that can cause an itchy, red skin rash. When people have this rash, they often say, “I got poison ivy.”

The same substance that causes the poison ivy rash is also found in poison oak, poison sumac, the ginkgo fruit, and mango peels.

How did I get poison ivy? — You might have gotten poison ivy if you:

- Touched a poison ivy plant
- Touched something that had the plant’s oils on it (such as clothing, animal fur, or garden tools)
- Were nearby when poison ivy plants were being burned

What does poison ivy look like? — Poison ivy and poison oak have 3 leaves coming off a single stem. That's why there is a saying, “leaves of 3, let them be.” The leaves start out green, but they can turn red or brown. Even dead plants can cause the rash (figure 1).

What will happen to my rash? — Your rash should go away within 1 to 3 weeks, but it might form blisters before it does. Blisters are little bubbles of skin that are filled with fluid. They can show up in different places at different times. But that does not mean that the rash is spreading. Touching the blisters or the fluid inside the blisters will not spread the rash.

What can I do to relieve the itching? — You can:

- Avoid scratching (that makes the itch worse)
- Try putting a cold, wet cloth or paper towels on your rash
- Use calamine lotion
- If your blisters have started to pop, use skin products that have aluminum acetate in them (examples include Burrow’s solution and Domeboro)

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — You should see your doctor or nurse if:

- Your rash is severe
- Most of your body is affected
- Your face or genitals are affected
- You have a lot of swelling
- You are not sure that you have poison ivy
- Your rash oozes pus or gives other signs of being infected
- Your rash does not get better after 2 to 3 weeks

If you have a very bad rash, your doctor or nurse can prescribe medicines called steroids. These medicines can
reduce swelling and relieve itching. Steroids come in creams, ointments, and pills. Your doctor or nurse will decide what form you should use.

Steroid creams and ointments are also sold without a prescription. But non-prescription versions are not usually strong enough to help with poison ivy.

**Some creams or lotions can make your rash worse** — The products listed below sometimes cause a reaction that makes your skin more itchy or irritated:

- Antihistamine creams or lotions
- Numbing products that have benzocaine
- Antibiotic ointments that have neomycin or bacitracin

**How do I keep from getting poison ivy again?** — You can:

- Stay away from poison ivy, even if the plant is dead
- Wear long sleeves and pants when working near poison ivy, and wash your clothes right away when you are done
- Wear thick vinyl gloves when doing yard work (latex and rubber gloves do not always protect against poison ivy)
- Gently wash with soap and water if you do touch poison ivy (do not scrub)
- Avoid burning poison ivy plants

**More on this topic**

- Patient education: Dermatitis (The Basics)
- Patient education: Poison ivy (Beyond the Basics)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our peer review process is complete. This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Oct 20, 2016.

The content on the UpToDate website is not intended nor recommended as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your own physician or other qualified health care professional regarding any medical questions or conditions. The use of UpToDate content is governed by the UpToDate Terms of Use. ©2016 UpToDate, Inc. All rights reserved.
Poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac have certain features that make them easy to identify. Poison ivy and poison oak have three leaves coming off each stem and flowers that sprout where two branches meet. Poison sumac often has five, seven, or more leaves coming off a single stem, and the leaves angle upward toward the top of the stem.


Graphic 79136 Version 4.0