IDENTIFICATION OF POISON IVY IS KEY IN PREVENTING EXPOSURES

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OKLAHOMA CITY – An expert in disguise, poison ivy may often be mistaken for a weed growing along your back fence, near a pathway at your local park, or deep in the woods. Knowing what poison ivy looks like is key to preventing exposures.

According to Scott Schaeffer, managing director of the Oklahoma Center for Poison and Drug Information (OCPDI), “Poison ivy may look different depending on the time of year. The plant has three leaflets that are all on the same stem, but in early spring it may look like a small shrub and then later begin to make a vine. During summer months, the leaves are green, but they turn red in the fall and have white berries.”

An exposure starts with itching, then a red rash, and then blisters. These symptoms of poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac can emerge any time from a few hours to several days after exposure to the plant oil, called urushiol. This oil is found in the sap of these poisonous plants. The oil sticks to pets, garden tools, toys, and anything else it touches. The oil can remain on a surface for years, causing problems for people who encounter it.

Because the plant oil can attach to skin within minutes, immediate action is best if you know you have been exposed. Washing may not stop the rash if more than 15 minutes have passed, but it can help stop further spreading. Contact with or breathing the smoke from burning poison ivy can cause a reaction. Do not burn poison ivy plants.

If you have been exposed to poison ivy:

* Wash exposed area with cool water and a grease-cutting dishwashing soap. Regular bar soap does not remove the oil and can spread the oil to other parts of the body.
* Wash clothes with regular laundry soap. With alcohol and water, wipe off shoes, tools, and anything else that may have been in contact with the oil. Be sure to wear gloves or cover your hands while performing this task and then discard the hand coverings.
* Blisters and itching will often occur within 48 hours of an exposure. For those rare people who react after their very first exposure, the rash usually appears after 7 to 10 days. Because the blisters do not contain the oil, they are not contagious.
* Antihistamine creams do not help control itching and can make the rash worse.

Contact the Poison Center if you have questions or concerns about an exposure to poison ivy. See a doctor if you:

* You have a temperature over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.
* The rash spreads to your eyes, mouth, genital area, or covers more than one-fourth of your skin area.
* The rash is not improving within a few weeks.
* The rash is widespread and severe.
* You have difficulty breathing.

Pharmacists and registered nurses at the poison center are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at (800) 222-1222. Please do not email the poison center or a member of the poison center staff, as poisoning emergencies are not managed through email.

The Oklahoma Center for Poison and Drug Information is a program of the University of Oklahoma College of Pharmacy at the OU Health Sciences Center. For more information, log on to www.oklahomapoison.org.

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