

Protect Outdoor Workers from Poisonous Plants

One of the most common health risks outdoors is contact with poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac. Many people get an itchy rash if they touch these plants—or if they touch clothes or tools that touched the plants. The rash may swell and get bumpy and blister, and possibly ooze or scab. Some people don't react badly to the first contact but get sensitized and have more serious reactions later.

Outdoor workers need to follow the two best protections against contact with poisonous plants.

1. Know what the plants look like, so workers can avoid touching them.
2. Keep skin covered when they work outdoors. Wear long sleeves, long pants, footwear that completely covers feet, and gloves. If workers are in fields that could contain poison ivy, wear high boots.

Show outdoor workers how to identify these plants. Use these identification tips from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration:

— Poison Ivy

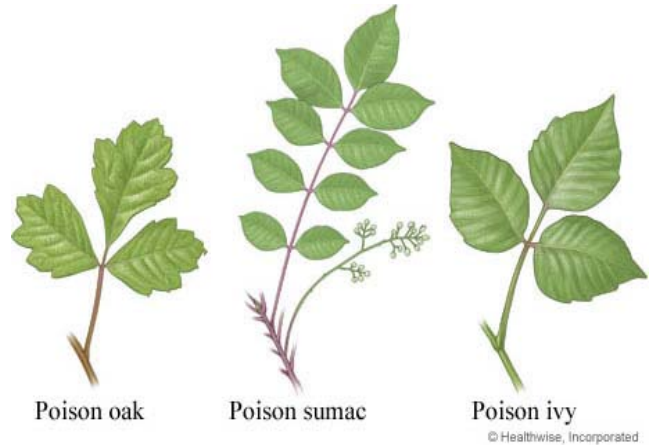
- Grows around lakes and streams in the Midwest and the East
- Woody, ropelike vine, a trailing shrub on the ground, or a free-standing shrub
- Normally three leaflets but may vary from groups of three to nine
- Green leaves in the summer and red leaves in the fall
- Yellow or green flowers and white berries

— Poison Oak

- In the east from New Jersey to Texas grows as a low shrub; in the west along the Pacific Coast grows to 6-foot-tall clumps or vines up to 30 feet long
- Oak-like leaves, usually in clusters of three
- Clusters of yellow berries

— Poison Sumac

- Grows in boggy areas, especially in the Southeast
- Rangy shrub up to 15 feet tall
- Seven to 13 smooth-edged leaflets
- Glossy pale yellow or cream-colored berries



Safety News

Warn workers to avoid touching these plants. Let them know that allergic reactions come from the sticky sap, or urushiol oil, which remains a hazard even when the plants are dead or dying. If workers do accidentally make contact, instruct them not to touch other parts of their body with their hands or with clothes or equipment that touched the plant. If they're not sure whether they had contact with poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac, they still need to wash thoroughly when they finish an outdoor job. Wash thoroughly three times, and then cleanse the area with rubbing alcohol.

If workers do get an itchy rash, advise workers that they may get relief from aspirin, hydrocortisone cream, or calamine lotion. Calamine may spread the problem, however. Sometimes antihistamines may give relief, though they can make workers drowsy, so they need to let you know if they use one. Warn them not to scratch, because that slows the healing. If the itching gets really bad or there's serious swelling, they need to see a doctor, who may prescribe a steroid to clear up the reaction.

Why It Matters

- Fully 85 percent of Americans will develop an allergic reaction to poison ivy, oak, or sumac.
- For some, the reaction will take several exposures to develop.
- For others, one exposure to the urushiol oils in these plants is all it takes.

Source: BLR Safety Daily Advisor, August 20, 2010