



BSA SAFETY MOMENT

POISONOUS PLANTS

SUMMARY

It's a far-too-typical scene. You return from a weekend camping trip or outing, and late in the evening Saturday or Sunday—under that layer of dirt—you find a rash. Chances are, you're one of the millions of Americans—many of them Scouts and Scouters—who are affected by poisonous plants each year. Almost all of us have heard “leaflets three, let it be.” Despite training to identify them on sight and efforts to avoid them, we all have stumbled through a patch of poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac, or one of several other plants that can cause an uncomfortable itch, a rash, and perhaps blisters.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Few escape the effects of urushiol, an oil in poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac that is the principal cause of the rash. Up to 85 percent of us are considered “allergic” and a few are seriously allergic. And if that's not bad enough, the plants grow in all 48 of the continental U.S. states.

As with many things, avoidance is the best action. Take a careful look where you camp or picnic and be sure to point out the plants to those who are not familiar with them. If you've walked through the plants, avoid contact with your shoes and pants, as the oil can rub off of materials and onto you. Don't use wood with hairy vines attached in campfires. Smoke from these plants can spread the oil and even create rashes in airways and the eyes.

If you think you've been exposed, you have a limited time to wash off the urushiol before it affects you. Use soap and water or a specially designed product (like Zanfel®, Ivy Wash®, or Tecnu®) that has been formulated to more fully remove the urushiol, especially when used within a few hours of exposure.

If you're not successful in removing the urushiol, a rash can develop wherever you've come in contact with it. The rash isn't contagious and can't be spread by the oozing of a blister.

Both hydrocortisone cream and calamine lotion work well to reduce the itching, as does cool water or even a swim. Antihistamine creams or lotions are not recommended, but oral antihistamines (like Benadryl®) may help ease itchiness. Scouts and Scouters should seek medical attention if the rash covers more than 10 percent of the body, if signs of an infection appear, or if the rash gets into the eyes.

RESOURCES

- *Boy Scout Handbook*, 13th ed., No. 34554
- *Fieldbook*, 5th ed., No. 34006
- *First Aid* merit badge pamphlet, No. 35897