

EARL'S PEARLS

Poison oak: prevention and treatment

BY EARL SHOWERMAN, M.D.

Poison oak is ubiquitous across the low elevation woodlands of the Applegate Valley, especially in areas where the soils have been disturbed, where it flourishes as ground cover, shrubs and vines. Most people are sensitive to the oil found on the leaf, stems and roots of the plant, which causes a delayed allergic reaction called contact dermatitis. Poison oak contact dermatitis usually appears one to two days following exposure to the plant oil and results in a very itchy red rash with raised red bumps and tiny blisters, often in line with the specific area of contact. If the face is affected, there may be marked swelling also.

Prevention is much more effective than treatment because poison oak dermatitis can take weeks to resolve. When you are around poison oak, stay on the beaten path away from the plants and wear protective clothing and gloves.

You also can prevent poison oak oil from adhering to your skin and causing a reaction by washing unprotected skin with soap and water within 30 minutes after contact with the plant. Technu and Zanafel are commercially available cleansing agents that will help remove the plant oil up to four to eight hours after contact. Ivy Block or Ivy Shield are barrier creams that can be applied prior to exposure and will help prevent an outbreak if you bathe within eight hours of contact.

Poison oak contact dermatitis is not contagious, although scratching the rash can be very harmful to the skin and increases the chances of getting a secondary infection. The treatment of contact dermatitis includes agents to reduce itching like Burrow's solution soaks, which help dry the oozing sores. Hydrocortisone and prescription cortisone

creams or ointments may be applied three to four times a day to reduce the local inflammation. For best effect, topical cortisone creams should be applied after washing the affected area with warm water, patting dry, and then applying a thin layer of medication. Wrapping the skin with a clear plastic wrap after putting on the cortisone medicine also can increase its absorption and effectiveness. In severe reactions, injections or a short course of oral cortisone medicine such as prednisone or Medrol may be needed. Most of the time short-term treatment with these medicines causes few serious side effects. Take medicine with food to help prevent stomach upset from these drugs. Antihistamine drugs can help relieve itching. Oral antibiotics are prescribed if an infection develops, usually indicated by increased redness, swelling and heat.



Poison oak (*Rhus diversiloba*)
Photo: www.sbcsar.org

Proper treatment will usually improve poison oak symptoms within two days. While the rash is not contagious from person to person, the plant resins may be present on your clothing or shoes, or in your pet's fur. Be sure to wash your hands, clean your nails, and wash your clothes and pets with soap and water to get rid of all the plant oils that may cause this common skin reaction.

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Kristi Cowles makes her Applegate debut



Photo: Annie Driver

Recording artist and recent Wisconsin transplant to the Applegate, Kristi Cowles, makes her Applegate musical debut with Clint Driver (right) on lead guitar and vocals and Steve Driver (left) on bass guitar. The trio performed to a standing-room-only venue at the home of Clint and Mary Driver..



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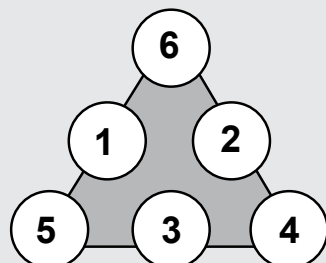
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