



Protecting Workers from Poison Oak

Approximately 70-80% of the population is sensitive to sap oils from poisonous plants like poison oak. Poison oak sap oil is a colorless, odorless resin called urushiol. Reaction to the oil typically begins with redness and swelling of the skin, followed by painful bumps or blisters. Sensitivity to the oil increases with each exposure.

Workers may become exposed through:

- Direct contact with a poison oak plant
- Indirect contact (touching tools, animals or clothing with urushiol on them)
- Inhalation of particles containing urushiol from burning plants

Urushiol oil sticks to most surfaces and can cause allergic reactions up to five years later.

Post-exposure symptoms:

- Red rash within a few days of contact
- Swelling
- Itching
- Possible bumps, patches, streaking or weeping blisters (note: blister fluids are not contagious)

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Worker Expectations

- Recognize and avoid contact with poisonous plants.
- Apply bentoquatam lotion to areas of skin prior to exposure – and reapply every four hours.
- Wear long sleeves, long pants, work boots and gloves.
- Carefully remove clothing and gloves at the end of each shift – minimizing potential skin contact.
- Wash clothing separately in hot water.
- Wear disposable gloves when cleaning boots, tools or anything exposed to urushiol oil. Discard disposable gloves after use.
- If skin is exposed, clean skin with large amounts of isopropyl rubbing alcohol. Wash with cold water without soap.
- Do not pet stray animals.
- Immediately report related symptoms to supervisor.

Avoidance

The first line of defense is to recognize poison oak plants and avoid them. Employees who are assigned outdoor duties should be able to identify poison oak and its relatives.

Poison oak grows up to six feet tall as a shrub or up to 30 feet long as a vine. The oak-like leaves are smaller than those of oak trees and grow in clusters of three. Poison oak has yellow berries, which may or may not be visible.

Protection

- Wear long sleeves, long pants, boots and gloves.
- Wash exposed clothing separately in hot water with detergent.
- Barrier skin creams, such as lotion containing bentoquatam, may offer some protection.
- After use, clean tools with rubbing alcohol or soap and lots of water. Urushiol can remain active on the surface of objects for up to five years.
 - Wear disposable gloves during this process.
- Do not burn plants or brush piles that may contain poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac.
- Inhaling smoke from burning plants can cause severe allergic respiratory problems.

First Aid

If exposed to a poisonous plant:

- Immediately rinse skin with rubbing alcohol, poison plant wash or degreasing soap (such as dishwashing soap) or detergent, and lots of water.
- Rinse frequently, so that wash solutions do not dry on the skin and further spread the urushiol.
- Scrub under nails with a brush.
- Apply wet compresses, calamine lotion or hydrocortisone cream to the skin to reduce itching and blistering.
 - Oatmeal baths or an antihistamine may help relieve itching (note: drowsiness can occur from antihistamines).
- In severe cases, or if the rash is on the face or genitals, seek professional medical attention.
- Call 911 or go to an emergency room if experiencing a severe allergic reaction, such as swelling or difficulty breathing, or if there's been a severe reaction in the past.

Thorough review of this material should take place during the new hire process and annually thereafter.

