Poison ivy: Is it contagious? [1]

Dear Alice,

This question is about poison ivy. Is it contagious? Does it spread to other parts of the afflicted person's body? Can someone else get it from touching them? My husband broke out with poison ivy last week and has been covering himself with calamine lotion on doctor's orders. The cream is not doing much, and the doctor did not give us much info about poison ivy. Can you enlighten us further?

Thanks.

? Ivy

Answer

Dear Ivy,

As they say ? leaves of three, let it be! Poison ivy is the infamous three-leaved plant that climbs, creeps, and grows in bushes in certain areas of North America. The itchy-scratchy situation that characteristically results from a brush with this ivy is caused by an allergic reaction. Specifically, the allergen is the plant?s oily, sticky resin, called urushiol, found in the roots, leaves, and stems of the plant (it?s also the same resin in poison oak and poison sumac). Most folks will show symptoms of an itchy, blistery rash within 48 hours of contact with the plant.

Poison ivy is contagious only by spreading the plant?s oil/resin; the rash itself is not contagious and does not spread. Scratching the rash during the first few days could spread the oil to other parts of the infected person's body. If a person has contact with someone who still has the resin on her/his skin or clothes, it may cause a reaction. A few good showers and a laundry will likely eliminate any residue of the plant oil, and thus, your risk for a rash.

The problem with poison ivy is that there is no specific treatment. Unfortunately, the affected person typically has to just wait it out ? for about two to three weeks on average. A few home and over-the-counter (OTC) remedies may help soothe itchy skin. These include:

- Applying calamine lotion,
- Placing a cool, wet compress over the infected areas a few times daily,
- Putting an oatmeal-based product on the rash, and
- Taking an antihistamine medication before bedtime to help ease the zzz?s.
List adapted from Mayo Clinic [2].

If the itching and reaction are persistent, has affected the face or genitals in particular, or covers a large part of the body, it’s a good idea to see a health care provider. Some people have strong allergic reactions that they may require the use of prescription medication. It's also possible that if the rash becomes infected, antibiotics may be necessary. In the meantime, keep him from scratching!

Alice!
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