

Poison Oak

Klamath National Forest



Each year, thousands of adults and children are treated for the itchy side effects of Poison Oak. Because they haven't learned to identify it in the wild, people unknowingly walk through it, play in it, and even eat it! Some people are immune to it, or only contract mild rashes when exposed. Most people, however, aren't so lucky. Upon contact, they develop a spreading, very itchy, and sometimes painful rash.

A natural oil on the stems and leaves of Poison Oak called urushiol is the culprit. It is not actually a poison, but it causes an allergic reaction. The oil adheres to skin and clothing and can spread by touch.

If you think you have been exposed to Poison Oak, **DO NOT TOUCH YOUR EYES**, or anything else for that matter. As soon as you can, remove all affected clothing, wash the affected area thoroughly with soap

and water and apply rubbing alcohol with cotton balls or alcohol wipes. It's a good idea to carry the prepackaged alcohol wipes when you are in areas that could contain Poison Oak. If a rash develops, a visit to the doctor or the local pharmacy may be in order.

Smoke from burning Poison Oak is a special problem and can cause severe reactions in people, internally as well as externally.

Everyone should learn to recognize Poison Oak and be on the look out for it whenever they go outside. It is always best to avoid exposure whenever possible. If you are going to spend any time in the woods or other wild places at elevations between sea level and 5000' you might want to memorize some characteristics about this plant.

What To Look For....

Three Parted Leaves...

The leaves are "3-parted. Each leaf has the appearance of 3 leaves. Depending on the time of year, leaves can be yellowish, deep green, red, orange, or reddish black. The oil in the plant causes the leaves to be very shiny.

Growth and Stems...

In winter and early spring, look for clumps of light brown or grayish stems, 1-6' tall with a strong upright habit in open areas and much smaller in shaded areas. When it grows next to a tree it can climb to 20' or more by using the tree for support. Older plants tend to branch but clumps of younger plants are usually made up of singular stems. At lower elevations, on dry slopes exposed to strong sun, the plants tend to spread out a bit and take on a more unkempt appearance, often rough and gray with splotches of light colored lichens all over.



Flowers and Berries...

Poison Oak bears small, hanging clusters of yellowish-green flowers in the spring that turn to small, greenish-white berries in late summer. The berries hang on through early winter with only the stems remaining by spring. To help identify Poison Oak, look closely for little hanging stems with white berries, or the remnants of berries (they can appear like little bunches of tiny, dried up grapes).

American Indian Uses...

Various tribes used Poison Oak for a variety of things. They fashioned baskets from the roots and stems. They ground the roots for a coarse bread meal. Parts of the plant were boiled down to produce a black dye. Some tribes even used a potent concoction from the plant as a wart remover.

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