



**University of North Carolina Wilmington  
Abrons Student Health Center**

## **INSTRUCTION SHEET: POISON IVY**

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed an allergic reaction to poison ivy or a similar plant.

The symptoms you have are due to contact with plant oil from poison ivy, poison sumac, or poison oak. The plant oil does not actually “poison” people; rather, the oil causes an allergic reaction.

An allergic reaction to poison ivy begins as a red, swollen rash, often in a linear (line) shape. The redness and swelling turn into blister-like areas. The rash most often occurs on exposed areas such as the arms and legs, but can occur on the neck, face, chest, back, or any part of the body.

About half the people who come into contact with poison ivy plant oil will react to it (half won't, but most of these become sensitive to poison ivy if exposed enough times). Exposure can occur by direct contact (touching plants), or by touching objects contaminated with plant oil (clothes, boots, pets, horses), or even from contact with smoke from plants burned in a fire.

The main symptom is intense itching in areas with rash. Itching begins a few hours to two days after exposure to the plant oil; itching and rash last up to two weeks if untreated.

### **MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR POISON IVY:**

1. Cool compresses applied to the skin help relieve itching. Wrap towels soaked in cool water or Burrow's solution (available over-the-counter) around the affected area. An oatmeal bath can also help relieve itching: Put one cup of oatmeal in a bathtub of lukewarm water.
2. Calamine lotion helps relieve itching. Experts recommend lotion without Benadryl (diphenhydramine), as it can further sensitize the skin.
3. Try not to scratch affected areas, or skin infection can result. Clip fingernails short.
4. Hydrocortisone cream (over-the-counter) helps reduce inflammation and itching. Rub the cream onto the rash three to four times a day.
5. Take over-the-counter antihistamines: In the morning, take a non-sedating antihistamine such as loratadine, 10 mg daily. At night, take diphenhydramine (Benadryl), 25 mg, 1 or 2 every 6 hours as needed. The main side effect of diphenhydramine is drowsiness, so do not drive, operate machinery, climb a ladder, etc., while taking the medicine. Stop taking the antihistamines when the itching and rash are gone.
6. If the provider prescribes medicine, take it as directed.
7. If your symptoms continue, schedule a follow-up appointment with your personal/referral doctor or return to the Student Health Center. Other factors may be responsible for the itching and rash.
8. Try to avoid contact with poison ivy in the future. Remember, “Leaves of three, let it be.” Poison ivy can take many forms, including a ground vine, climbing vine, or low shrub. Wear long pants and sleeves if you are outdoors around plants. Wash your skin and clothes well with soap and water if you are exposed. Don't touch pets if they have been in the woods, and avoid fires in which weeds are burned.