5 minute safety talk

Stay on the Prowl for Poisonous Plants

As the sun beats down and temperatures rise, poisonous plants may be the last thing on your mind. But if you work outside, they are as real a threat as sun and heat.

Can you identify ivy?

In much of North America, the most common hazardous plant is poison ivy. It comes in three forms: a weed mixed in among grasses, a small bush in a fencerow or a climbing vine on a tree.

Poison ivy is fairly easy to spot. Each dark green stem has three shiny oval-shaped leaflets, with white flowers in late summer and white berries in early fall. Also in the fall, the leaves turn dark red or purple. Even in winter, despite its brown and brittle appearance, poison ivy still contains uroshiol, the oil that results in an itchy rash.

You need not even contact a damaged plant to be exposed to uroshiol. It sticks to leather, animal fur, clothing and gardening instruments. Even when it's being destroyed by fire, poison ivy can send the oil up in smoke, posing a threat to your eyes, mouth and lungs.

Watch for a rash of symptoms

If you come into contact with poison ivy, wash with soapy water as soon as possible. It takes a while for the oil to set in, so if you wash quickly enough, you might be able to prevent a reaction. If you are sensitive to poison ivy, a red itchy rash will appear within 12 to 48 hours. Blistering and severe itching may follow. The blisters should crust over and heal over 10 to 14 days.

Treatment is a lot like the common cold. You can soothe the symptoms, but mostly you just have to ride it out. To relieve itching, try an over-the-counter lotion such as calamine or zinc oxide. A doctor may prescribe hydrocortisone cream for more severe cases.

If symptoms do not show improvement or worsen, contact your health care provider immediately. If you have trouble breathing, feel faint as a result of the rash, or if your eyes, skin, throat or breathing are irritated by smoke from burning poisonous plants, seek emergency care.

Do not eat out

Ingestion is another source of plant poisonings. Do not eat any plant while in the field because you never know if it's poisonous. Do not be fooled by animals; a squirrel or bird can munch on a plant that a human can not eat safely. If you ingest the berries or leaves of a plant such as poison ivy, you may require emergency medical care.

Get to know villains

If you work outdoors, you may run across more than the common ivy. Companies should provide employees with a plant identification manual with color photos, to help them learn the specific characteristics of poisonous plants in their region. Here are more poisonous plants to watch out for:

- **Poison oak.** A shrub or vine that resembles poison ivy; it has three to five leaflets and yellowish berries in the fall. It is very common in wooded areas.
- **Poison sumac.** A larger shrub (4 to 6 feet high) with 7 to 13 leaflets. Similar to poison ivy, it produces white berries and its leaves turn orangish-red in the fall. You will usually find it in damp areas like bogs and swamps or roadside ditches where water collects.
- **Ragweed.** The culprit behind hay fever can incite symptoms such as swollen skin, watery eyes and a runny nose. A member of the sunflower family, this plant displays yellow-green flowers in the summer and fall and can grow up to 8 feet tall.
- **Stinging nettles.** This low-growing plant with heart-shaped leaves and stems covered with tiny hair-like needles is common in wooded areas. Its sting is followed by burning, itching and/or a straight line of small blisters.
- **Sacred datura.** This white flower looks like an upturned umbrella. Most common at elevations above 3,500 feet, it is sometimes called "moon lily" because its flowers open at night. Some people develop a skin rash from contact with the stem or flower. Other species of datura also are poisonous.

Dress for success

Disposable or washable rubber gloves are recommended because the resins that cause a reaction can get into cloth and leather and infect you the next time that article of clothing is handled or worn. Long-sleeved shirts tucked into gloves and long pants tucked into socks work well.

If you do come into contact with a poisonous plant, be careful not to touch exposed skin with infected clothing. Take the infected clothes off carefully to make sure you do not touch your skin with them. Launder these clothes separately, and run a wash cycle to rinse the washer container before laundering other clothing. Since uroshiol can stay potent for years, act quickly in cleaning infected items.

Prevention is key

Apply barrier creams before working in areas with poisonous plants to prevent skin irritations. Immunization to these plants is available to some outdoor workers in constant contact with them. Check with your health care provider for more information.

Education and prevention are the best ways to steer clear of poisonous plants. Familiarize yourself with the plants of your region, dress to keep uroshiol off your skin and out of your airways, and you will stay reaction-free at work and play.

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