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July 2006

## SIP TIP: **POISON IVY, POISON OAK & POISON SUMAC**

The active agent in poison ivy/oak/sumac – Urushiol (pronounced OOH-ROO-SHEE-ALL) – is a clear, oily substance often also referred to as a resin. It is found in every fiber of poison oak/ivy/sumac plants and is amazingly potent. It will cause a rash to break out in approximately 75 percent of the population when it comes into contact with the skin.

When the sap of a poison ivy plant (or its cousins) touches your skin, it's usually just a matter of time before the rash begins, unless the urushiol in the sap is washed off in 5 to 10 minutes. Urushiol oil binds with the skin after about 10 minutes and becomes very difficult to remove. At that point, a normal shower actually tends to spread the resulting rash, rather than help mitigate it.

Urushiol causes a primary irritation of the skin, proportional to the amount of oil involved. The rash usually appears within 24 to 72 hours, beginning as swollen red patches, with a few fluid-filled blisters. The blisters become larger as the reaction progresses, later breaking down and weeping. In its final stages, the entire affected area is covered by an oozing, scaling crust. Importantly, a person not allergic to urushiol the first time they come into contact with it can become allergic as the skin sensitizes to the oil. It's a matter of time and the volume of the urushiol exposure.

### **Protecting Employees**

Several steps can be taken to minimize potential exposure to your employees and others.

- **Build Awareness**
  - The best way to combat urushiol exposure is through employee awareness.
  - The old saying, "leaves of three, let it be" still applies, although poison sumac has 7 to 13 leaves on each branch.
  - Make certain your employees know the dangers of burning urushiol and breathing the smoke. Masks might protect them from breathing in urushiol, but will be of little help to their unprotected, exposed skin or to unsuspecting neighbors or coworkers who are not properly equipped.
- **Provide On-Site Response**
  - If urushiol is completely removed from the skin within several hours of exposure, there is an excellent chance the rash can be avoided in the first place.
  - A cleanser, specially formulated for removing urushiol, will do the trick.
  - Simply washing the affected area with regular soap will usually not help.
  - Urushiol is very difficult to remove, especially after 10 minutes, without chemically breaking its bond with the skin.
- **Provide Pre-Exposure Barriers**
  - Employees and others who have exhibited a specific sensitivity to urushiol in the past should be counseled about ways to avoid re-infection which could involve the use of a pre-exposure barrier lotion before going outdoors.
- **Quickly Treat Victim**
  - It is imperative to remove the urushiol and allow the healing process to proceed. Early treatment regimens can often minimize the severity of the episode.

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