

# RISK SIMPLIFIED

## RESOURCES

[NIOSH Poisonous Plants](#)

[University of California Pest Management Poison Oak](#)

## QUESTIONS

[Email PRISM Risk Control](#)  
or call 916.850.7300

## Poison Oak

by Sarah Bruno, ARM

While there are many poisonous plants throughout the United States, in California, the most prevalent is poison oak. It is possible that outdoor workers will come across poison oak while completing necessary job tasks such as weed eating, clearing brush, or pruning. Contact with poison oak can cause an itchy rash, swelling, blisters, and in some cases, more severe allergic reactions. According to the UC Integrated Pest Management Program, the number of working hours lost as a result of poison oak makes it the most hazardous plant in the state. Identifying and therefore avoiding the plant is the most effective way to prevent contact and the skin irritation that often follows.

### Identification

Leaves are the best and easiest way to identify a plant. Western Poison Oak usually has leaf groups or clusters of 3 and leaves with lobed or deeply toothed edges, similar to oak leaves. The urushiol (oil found in the sap) that causes the allergic reaction is present in the roots, stems, leaves, and berries of poison oak and is released when the leaf or other plant parts are bruised, damaged, or burned. In the fall, the green leaves turn red and the urushiol is more concentrated in the leaves. In the winter the deciduous plant loses all its leaves making it much harder to identify.

Urushiol transfers very easily to clothing, skin, and other surfaces, and a very small amount can still cause an allergic reaction. Once items have been exposed, the urushiol can stay active on those surfaces for up to 5 years.

In California, poison oak most often grows as a shrub, but it can also look more like a vine. Poison Oak grows in a wide range of habitats from sea level to elevations of 5000 feet.



*"Leaves of 3, Let it be"*

# RISK SIMPLIFIED

## Prevention

Identification and avoidance are the best way to prevent a poison oak related allergic reaction. If work must be done in an area where poison oak is known to be present, the following steps can be taken to reduce potential exposure.

- Wear protective clothing, such as long pants, long sleeved shirts, boots and gloves
- Avoid touching your face, skin, and clothing while working
- Wash exposed clothing separately in hot water and detergent
- Clean exposed tools and equipment with rubbing alcohol, a bleach solution, or soap, and lots of water - be sure to wear disposable gloves while completing this task
- Avoid burning poison oak plants

## Signs & Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction to urushiol include redness, minor inflammation, warmth, blistering, tenderness, and itching of the exposed skin.



## Treatment

If poison oak exposure is believed to have occurred, the following steps can be taken immediately, even before a rash occurs:

- Cleanse the area with soap and water to remove as much of the urushiol as possible
  - Use rubbing alcohol, degreasing soap (i.e. dawn dishwashing soap), or laundry detergent
  - Use lots of water and rinse frequently
- Consider over-the-counter products specifically formulated to work against urushiol, such as [Tecnu](#) or [Zanfel](#), and follow package directions carefully
- If a rash appears – cortisone cream or calamine lotion can be applied
- Avoid scratching as it slows healing and can lead to scarring and/or infection
- Seek medical attention for severe cases or if a rash develops on the face or genitals
- Call 911 or seek emergency care for severe allergic reactions such as difficulty breathing, swallowing, or fever

Agencies are encouraged to train outdoor workers how to identify and as a result, avoid poison oak. For additional information or questions on poison oak, please reach out to [PRISM Risk Control](#).