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## Don't Let Poison Ivy, Oak and Sumac Ruin Your End of Summer Plans

As summer is winding down and fall is fast approaching, people are spending more time outdoors to savor the last of the long summer nights. While it is essential to be active, it is also important to keep in mind the need for protection when venturing outdoors. Don't let poison ivy, oak and sumac ruin your end of summer plans!

Poison ivy, oak and sumac can cause an allergic reaction which results from touching the oil of these plants. Urushiol oil is the poisonous ingredient that makes ivy, oak and sumac such a nuisance while spending time outdoors. Did you know that all it takes is one nanogram (one billionth of a gram) to cause a rash? Coming into contact with bruised roots, stems, flowers, leaves, fruit, pollen of poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac can spread the poisonous oil. The oil can be on the plant itself or on other objects that come into contact with the plant such as clothing, garden tools or sports equipment. The oil can even remain under the fingernails for several days, so it is important to implement good hand-washing techniques after spending time outdoors. These practices include washing your hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds, or by singing "happy birthday" twice to ensure proper cleanliness.

When infected, a person may experience the following symptoms such as burning skin; itching, red streaks on the skin; small bumps or larger raised areas; swelling or blisters filled with fluid that may leak out. Depending on what part of the body was infected, the eyes, mouth, eyelids and neck may be infected as well. An over-the-counter antihistamine such as Benadryl or steroid cream can be used to relieve itching for mild reactions. Other treatments for mild reactions include cool baths and cool, wet compresses to the affected areas. However, if the reaction is severe or near the eyes, it is important to get to the nearest emergency room immediately.

While spending time outdoors, it is important to keep the following things in mind:

- Do **not** make ivy, oak or sumac plants airborne by burning or using lawn mower and trimmer. Urushiol oil can enter the respiratory system through inhalation and be dangerous to your health.
- Poison sumac can have anywhere from 7 to 13 leaves on a branch, while poison ivy and oak have 3 leaves per cluster.
- Even if your plants are dead, you can still have a reaction. Urushiol oil stays active on any surface, including dead plants, for up to 5 years.
- Individuals who have never been infected before are still susceptible to a reaction; in fact, 90% of people are allergic to urushiol oil, but it is only a matter of time until exposure occurs. Like any other allergen, the more times you are exposed, the more likely it is that you will have a reaction.

The rash will usually occur between 8 and 48 hours after contact with urushiol oil, but the rash usually takes more than a week to show up the *first* time contact is made. A common misconception is that if you touch a person with poison ivy, oak or sumac, you will contract it as well. However, a person needs to come into contact with the poisonous **oil** to contract poison ivy, oak or sumac.

If contact is made with any of these three poisonous plants, it is best to wash the area immediately with warm water and soap. Taking this step can prevent a reaction if contact is made immediately before, but it usually does not help if done more than an hour after contact. Be sure to carefully wash any contaminated objects or clothing alone in hot, soapy water and do not let the items touch any other clothing or materials.

For more information about poison ivy, oak or sumac, contact the American Academy of Dermatology by visiting <http://www.aad.org>. Any other public health related questions can be directed to the Central Connecticut Health

District, serving the towns of Berlin, Newington, Rocky Hill and Wethersfield at (860)721-2822 or by visiting <http://www.ccthd.org>.