

Getting to Know Poison Oak — 10

5. Working Around Poison Oak

You can greatly reduce your risk of exposure and minimize any skin reactions to poison oak by dressing appropriately and cleaning up thoroughly. Though most adults are sensitive to urushiol, relatively severe dermatitis is likely to be a problem only for those who are inadvertently exposed and who don't wash up afterwards.

What to Wear

Wear old or grubby work clothes and shoes that can be laundered or scrubbed (or disposed?) after use. Poison oak sap oxidizes to a shiny black lacquer that can stain clothing and shoes. You may want to wear dark colored clothing, so any stains won't show. (Or, you may want to wear lighter colored clothing so you will be able to see any residual urushiol contamination after laundering, and perhaps dispose of items if appropriate.)

- Long pants
- Long-sleeved shirt that covers/protects wrists
- Washable long-sleeved overlayer, preferably with tight or elastic cuffs (fleece works well)
- Sturdy work shoes—taller (washable) boots are desirable for ankle protection
- Long socks can give extra leg protection
- Eye protection (wrap around goggles or sunglasses)
- Sweatband (some want this to keep sweat and hair off their face)
- Gloves (see more below)

Moisture on clothing, whether sweat or rain, can carry urushiol oils through cloth to skin. Wearing two long-sleeved layers on top—a shirt, topped with a looser over-layer that is easy to remove and launder—gives extra protection. However, some people sweat too much when working, and prefer just a single layer. In that case, choose a loose-fitting layer. If it does get touched by poison oak, the sap will not soak through to skin as easily. However, tight, preferably elastic cuffs are desirable to protect wrists. (Some people like to tape their wrists, or wear cut up tube socks on their arms. But these can also be itchy and hot when working, causing sweat or becoming a conduit for oils to seep through. They can also be tricky to remove without contaminating the skin anyway. I rely on long-sleeved gloves instead.)

Gloves:

I prefer to wear two layers of gloves:

- underneath: a long-sleeved **chemical-resistant nitrile glove** to protect the wrist and forearm (Boss brand from Bi-Mart works well)
- over the top: any **latex or nitrile-dipped** (washable) cotton glove.



The nitrile glove prevents urushiol from seeping through to skin, while the outer glove protects the nitrile glove from puncture, and also provides the grip for pulling slippery poison oak vines.

I launder the outer cotton/latex-dipped gloves in the washing machine, and I use a scrub brush and hot soapy water to wash the chemical resistant gloves and find I can wear them many times

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before they get too stained and contaminated. When I pull off both sets of gloves at the end of the work session, I keep them “outside out,” as I don’t want to contaminate the insides, especially of the nitrile gloves.

Some people find the nitrile gloves get too clammy inside while working. This does happen, as they are not breathable. But nitrile resists poison oak oils better than latex/rubber, cotton, leather, or suede. I find it manageable, and I haven’t found a better solution.

Some prefer thick leather gauntlet gloves. However, these gloves are relatively expensive, and also difficult to clean. Poison oak oils can permanently bond, stain, and penetrate through them. I also find them too stiff and difficult to work in, especially after a washing.

Workday, and In the Field

- Think ahead about how you will remove your gloves and clothes and get them into the laundry without contaminating yourself, your transportation, or your door knobs, etc. at the end of the work day. You may want to lay out your cleanup supplies (soap, alcohol, wash cloth—see next section, Cleaning Up) and set up your washing machine ahead of time.
- You may want to bring a **plastic bucket or large plastic bag** and/or put a washable poly **tarp** down in your car or cart for putting dirty gloves and tools after working. 
- **Leave home anything that you don’t need:** watch, jewelry, cell phone, wallet, extra keys, etc. The fewer things you bring, the fewer things you will need to wash later. If you drive, bring just your license and keys you need. You might want to zip the license into a clean pocket or plastic bag. If you carry a bag with supplies into the field, remember that the bag will get contaminated as you carry it around.
- Bring a **water bottle**. Think about how you will open and drink from it without contaminating the drinking lip. 
- You may want to **eat a snack**, and you will definitely want to **go to the bathroom** immediately before you leave for the work session. Once you get your clothes and gloves contaminated, you will not be able to handle food or use the bathroom without risking spreading the oils to your skin or mouth.
- Once you touch poison oak or tools that have touched poison oak, **do not remove your gloves** until you are done for the day. You will contaminate yourself and need to wash ASAP. When you are done for the day, plan to go directly home to clean yourself up.
- Think about what you will do when your nose itches, or your glasses slip down, or a fly lands on you, or sweat pours down your forehead or neck, or your gloves get clammy inside. (Keep a clean shoulder and rub on that? Rub on a tree? Come with a sweatband? Grin and bear it?)
- If you are going to wash and re-use (nitrile) gloves, keep them “outside out,” so they don’t get contaminated on the inside.

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Cleaning Up

There is much folklore about how to clean up after poison oak exposure, or how to treat a rash. Some of the treatments proposed are quite preposterous, containing harsh solvents or toxic ingredients that may be as bad or worse than poison oak exposure itself. Some are just very expensive. Ordinary soaps and detergents can work just fine to remove the oily residue, but technique is important. All soaps and detergents by their nature can be skin irritants. Scrubbing can also be irritating, so don't get carried away.

For skin: The goal is to remove the urushiol oil as quickly as possible after exposure—within 10-15 minutes is best. Though the urushiol bonds with skin relatively quickly, some solvents and surfactants are able to leach it out of skin up to 8 hours later. It is important to wash affected areas very thoroughly, as just trace amounts of urushiol left behind are enough to cause a reaction.



- **Water** alone is effective at diluting and rinsing off poison oak oil before it has bonded to skin. Use large amounts of comfortable temperature (but not hot) water to flush the affected area. If cleaning up after working around poison oak, wash hands and wrists thoroughly first, before moving on to other body parts. Don't forget face, neck, and ankles.
- Anything that helps remove oily residues can be useful. This includes **soap, scrubbing with a wash cloth or scrub brush, or various solvents (rubbing alcohol is especially effective)**. The trick is to continue to flush with copious water, and to be careful to rinse the flow down and off the body to avoid spreading the urushiol up your arms or onto other parts of the body. Gently scrub any crevices where trace residues might linger—around nails and knuckles, between fingers, etc. But avoid scrubbing so hard that you damage skin.
- A full shower can also be helpful. Avoid baths (which can spread the oils). Most sources warn not to use hot water (which, while it can help remove oils, also opens pores and may allow the oils to penetrate the skin more easily).
- **Ordinary soap or detergent** is fine, especially when accompanied by scrubbing and copious rinsing. Liquid soaps may be preferable to bar soap, though some swear by Fels Naptha, oatmeal, lava, or other abrasive soap for the extra friction that aids in removal of oils. Soaps with herbal ingredients made for poison oak may or may not be any more effective than ordinary soap. Any “degreasing” dish liquid or hand cleaner (Seventh Generation, Dawn, Goop, Gojo, etc.) will be helpful at removing the oils. However, the degreasing solvents and surfactants in



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these products (and also any fragrances, dyes, or anti-bacterial ingredients such as triclosan) may be allergens or irritants, or pose their own health or environmental hazards. Always best to use sparingly, especially on skin.

- **Isopropyl (rubbing) alcohol** can rinse or leach urushiol out of the skin for up to 6 hours after exposure. Some sources indicate it is more effective than Tecnu (and it is much less expensive). It is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. A cloth dipped in alcohol (or alcohol wipes) can be useful if followed by good rinsing. Alcohol (70%) can be diluted further with water to be less harsh on the skin. Use sparingly—alcohol is readily absorbed by the skin and it can be toxic in large amounts.



- Tec Labs® **Tecnu Extreme Medicated Poison Ivy Scrub** and **Zanfel®** are two very expensive poison oak wash products that claim to remove urushiols and also reduce itch. They contain various surfactants and micro polyethylene beads as abrasives. Tecnu also contains alcohol, and the herb grindelia as an anti-itch ingredient. Because of their solvents or surfactants, these products can remove oils hours after exposure. Yet, solvents and surfactants may pose their own risks to health or the environment. If you are comfortable using these products on your skin, they do seem to be effective at removing urushiol and reducing reactions.

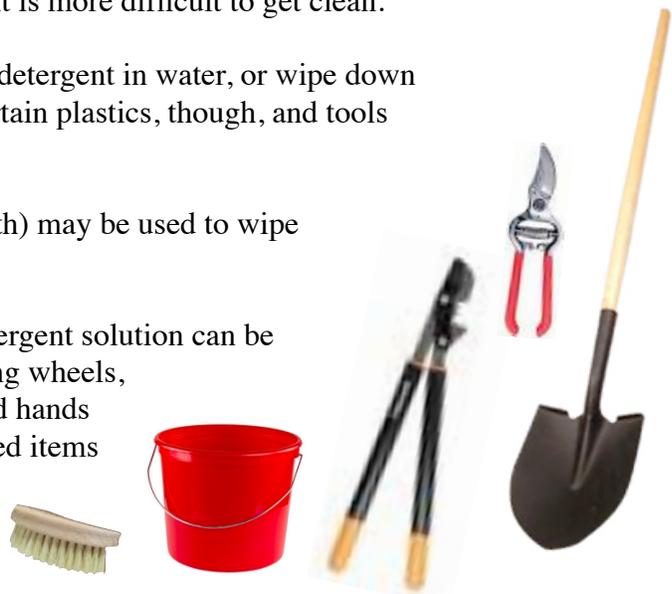
For clothes: Handle contaminated items carefully. Use hot water and regular detergent, and wash contaminated items separately from other laundry. Shoes can be laundered, wiped down with alcohol, or scrubbed with warm soapy water and a brush, depending on the type of material. It may not be possible to remove the oils completely from certain fabrics such as leather, suede or others, which may be permanently stained. Some also recommend wiping down the inside of the washing machine to remove possible oily residue at the fill line. I have not found this to be necessary with the (stainless steel) basket in my washing machine.

For gloves: I launder latex-dipped cotton (outer) gloves with my dirty clothing. I use a laundry brush and detergent to scrub the outside of the chemical resistant nitrile (inner) gloves. I avoid turning gloves inside out when I remove them, as I want to avoid getting urushiol oils down into the inside of the fingers, where it is more difficult to get clean.

For tools: Scrub with a brush and a degreasing detergent in water, or wipe down with rubbing alcohol. Alcohol may damage certain plastics, though, and tools may need to be re-lubricated.

For pets: Alcohol wipes (or alcohol-dipped cloth) may be used to wipe down pet fur, if a full bath is not possible.

Other items: A cloth dipped in alcohol or a detergent solution can be used to clean house or car door handles, steering wheels, keys, or anything else touched by contaminated hands or tools. Be careful when handling contaminated items—wear gloves, wash carefully.



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If You Get The Itch

The cleaning steps above should dramatically reduce the severity of any reaction that does occur. However, if you fail to fully remove the urushiol oil, a rash may appear. Most poison oak rashes will self-resolve within 2 weeks. The steps that follow are for helping soothe the itch in mild, limited reactions. If you do have an extensive reaction, or open blisters, or a reaction in a sensitive place such as near eyes or genitals, you may want to seek professional medical advice. A doctor may prescribe oral steroids for severe cases. They are powerful drugs.

- Avoid scratching. You don't want to break the skin or cause infection.
- Running **very HOT (but not scalding) water** onto affected skin can offer relief from itching for many hours. The itching will briefly become very intense and then will stop, supposedly because the nerves responsible for conveying the sensation to the brain become overloaded and quit. As soon as the itching starts again, go back to the heat treatment. According to Dr. Andrew Weil, hot water treatment will cause the whole reaction to resolve much more quickly than it would otherwise. (Note: Some dermatologists say hot water will further dry irritated skin or irritate the rash. However, the hot water method is widely recognized as an effective way to control itch in the folklore about poison oak, and it really does seem to work. Use your own judgment, and use only for mild cases. Don't burn yourself!)



- **Calamine lotion** is a thin pink solution of zinc oxide with ferric oxide or zinc carbonate. Topically applied, it is effective at soothing mild itch.
- Some recommend a poultice or mask of **bentonite clay or baking soda** as a soothing, drying, and even less toxic alternative to calamine. These can be messy.
- **Aloe vera gel** can also be applied to cool, soothe, and heal irritated skin.

- Avoid over-the-counter topical antihistamine or anti-itch creams. They are considered ineffective, or worse, they can even prolong the rash or further irritate or damage the skin (evidently many contain ingredients that commonly cause new allergic or toxicity reactions).



Some botanical remedies (historical and modern) include poultices, salves, or teas made from: Grindelia robusta (gum plant), jewelweed, narrow-leaf plantain, yerba santa, roots of mule ears, mugwort, Pacific madrone and manzanita, aloe vera, honeysuckle, rhubarb, milkweed.

Note that grindelia is listed as the active ingredient in Tecnu Extreme Medicated Poison Ivy Scrub. Also, in a 2012 study, jewelweed mash was found to be effective in reducing poison ivy dermatitis (though extracts were not, and soaps made of these extracts were no more effective than jewelweed-free soaps).

Freshly cut pieces of mushrooms, apples and potatoes contain the enzyme tyrosinase, which is an enzyme that can oxidize (“detoxify”) phenolic compounds such as urushiol. But once the cut pieces turn brown, the tyrosinase is already used up and no longer effective.