

# Happiness Through Health

by Otto McClarrip

## POISON IVY

"LEAFLETS THREE, LET IT BE," is the only sure way of preventing poison ivy (Rhus radicans), the cause of the most common skin disease in the United States. Therefore, during these summer months when much time is spent out-of-doors, make a special effort to avoid contact with all green plants with three leaves.

The family of plants to which poison ivy belongs includes oakleaf, found in the south-eastern part of the country; poison oak, found in California, Oregon, and Washington; poison sumac, which is distributed from the eastern seaboard into Louisiana and Minnesota; and poison ivy, which can be found in every state except California and Nevada.

The plants usually grow in the form of vines or ground shrubs (poison sumac does not appear as a vine) and may occasionally reach the height of a small tree. The chemical compounds (catechols) produced by these plants have erroneously been called poisons when in actual fact they are allergens (substances capable of producing allergic reactions).

### No Reaction to First Exposure

The very first exposure to poison ivy will not produce a reaction. However, if a person has become allergic, the second exposure will result in a dermatitis withing seven to ten days. Subsequent exposures may reduce the time of the onset of symptoms from a few hours up to two days.

No one should assume complete immunity to poison ivy, since repeated exposure may produce the disease. Only the area of the body which has been in contact with the plant is affected; the severity of the eruption is dependent on the amount of allergen deposited on the skin and the allergic sensitivity of the individual.

SOAP WILL DESTROY THE ALLERGEN; washing the skin immediately after contact will reduce the chances of developing symptoms. Therefore, it is important to rinse the affected skin area thoroughly to be sure that all traces of the allergen has been removed. The disease cannot spread by releasing the blister fluid through scratching.

The effect of spreading is achieved by the response of areas of the allergen because of the varying amounts deposited and the period of exposure. Thus, a person may notice blisters appearing on his fingers and later his arms simply because he had far more of the allergen on his fingers.

### Calamine Lotion Helpful

After washing off the allergen to reduce the effect of the disease, the use of cold water compresses to reduce itching and inflammation is advised. Calamine lotion, when used early, will help to dry up the small blisters. Oral antihistamines may also help to reduce itching. In severe cases your physician may use a local or systemic cortisone treatment.

Scratching of the blisters can occasionally result in the development of secondary infections. The use of various patent medicines is generally not advised since some may contain ingredients which produce equally uncomfortable allergic reactions.

To prevent poison ivy learn to recognize the various plants in this family and then keep as far away from it as possible. If such plants are growing in or near your property you may wish to explore the use of herbicides with your agricultural extension agent (or some similar knowledgeable person - depending on where you live) to rid your area of this major nuisance.

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