



## News Update

### Tips: Poison Oak, Ivy And Sumac

As the nation's firefighters battle blazes during the height of this summer's wildfire season, few know that an equal danger lurks underfoot. According to the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), nearly one-third of USFS firefighters are forced to leave the line during a fire because of rashes caused by poison ivy or poison oak.

According to the American Academy of Dermatology, poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac are the most common cause of allergic reactions in the United States, noting that each year 10 million to 50 million Americans develop an allergic rash after contact with these poisonous plants. Burning branches or logs that carry even a small amount of urushiol, the toxin carried in poison ivy, oak and sumac plants, can cause people to suffer from systemic reactions and/or respiratory attacks. The inhalation of the toxic urushiol can enter the lungs and/or blood stream and cause internal blistering and other related health risks. Firefighters and smokejumpers are especially susceptible as they battle blazes in wooded areas with a high density of poison oak, ivy and sumac.

"Reactions to poison ivy, oak and sumac are recognized within the industry as one of the top causes of disability and lost work time for firefighters," said Robyn Benincasa, a San Diego firefighter and world-renowned adventure racer. "It is important to become educated about how to recognize the plants and do everything possible to minimize the chances of inhaling the toxic urushiol vapors."

Zanfel Laboratories Inc., manufacturer of Zanfel™ Poison Ivy, Oak and Sumac Wash, recommends the following tips to firefighters and smokejumpers to avoid exposure to these toxic plants and to treat the outbreak if it does occur:

### How Firefighters Can Avoid Contact with Poison Oak, Ivy and Sumac

- **Suit-Up:** As you head outdoors, wear protective clothing containing neoprene or polyurethane to prevent the poisonous oils from touching your skin.
- **Wear Gloves:** Wear thick gloves when handling equipment. Urushiol can bind to rubber hoses, tools and most pieces of equipment. Note: Urushiol can still penetrate rubber gloves.
- **Watch Where Animals Wander:** Animals do not react to poison oak, ivy and sumac toxin, but rescued animals can easily carry urushiol and contaminate you and your team.
- **Wear a Mask:** Even though smoke may not be visibly present, urushiol can be carried on tiny particles of ash and dust and may remain in the air from a recent fire.
- **Wash-Up:** To avoid contamination to poison oak, ivy or sumac, wash all equipment, gloves and exterior clothing immediately with soap and water.

### If You Think You Have Been Exposed to Poison Oak, Ivy or Sumac

- **Cleanse:** Immediately cleanse the area with plain soap and water. Urushiol will bind to the skin

anywhere from five minutes to two hours after exposure.

- Relief: Treat the origin of the reaction, not just the symptoms or reaction to the exposure.
- Decontaminate: Remove and wash all gloves, clothes, shoes and shoelaces, and equipment that may have come in contact with the toxic plants.
- Don't Scratch! While scratching does not spread the outbreak, it may cause infection because it allows bacteria from dirt on the hands to enter the skin.
- Seek Medical Attention: Firefighters who suspect they have been exposed to smoke containing poison oak, ivy or sumac, or those whose topical symptoms persist and/or for whom the rash has spread to the mouth or eyes, should seek medical attention immediately.

### Other Tips

Here's additional tips from OSHA (<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/sawmills/poison.html>)

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants, tucked into boots. Wear cloth or leather gloves.
- Apply barrier creams to exposed skin.
- Educate workers on the identification of poison ivy, oak and sumac plants.
- Educate workers on signs and symptoms of contact with poisonous ivy, oak and sumac.
- Keep rubbing alcohol accessible. It removes the oily resin up to 30 minutes after exposure.

### About Poison Oak, Ivy and Sumac Reactions

Poison ivy, oak and sumac reactions are triggered by the body's allergic response to urushiol, whereby the immune system attacks the skin containing the oil, producing symptoms such as rashes, oozing blisters, itching and swelling. The allergic response occurs anywhere from 12 to 48 hours after exposure to the oil and can take as long as 10 days to several weeks to heal.

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