

BEST REMEDY

Rash decisions

Had an unfortunate run-in with poison ivy, oak or sumac? Choose from these over-the-counter treatments

BY MICHELLE VILLETT



YOU CAN GET IT WHEN you go camping or hiking, or even after petting your dog. Poison ivy (or its relatives poison oak and poison sumac) is the world's most common allergen that causes allergic contact dermatitis; about 50 percent of people are reactive. This rash is the one summer souvenir that no one wants to bring home.

"The reaction is triggered by urushiol, a sticky oil in the sap of these plants that is easily transferred to skin, clothing and pets," says Dr. Shannon Humphrey, a clinical instructor in the department of dermatology and skin science at the University of British Columbia. Exposure typically comes about by touching any part of the plants (even dead ones); by contacting urushiol on other surfaces, such as tools or animals (the latter don't develop a reaction thanks to their fur); by transferring it yourself through touching one contaminated area of your body before touching another; or by inhaling smoke from burning these plants. Although it's not contagious, you can also get the condition through contact with urushiol on another person's skin or clothes.

The first time you're exposed, you may not have any reaction, or it may take up to three weeks to appear. But on subsequent occasions, "it takes just 24 to 48 hours to develop itching, irritation, swelling, redness and blisters—small ones in mild or moderate cases and very large ones in severe cases," says Dr. Peter Vignjevic, assistant clinical professor in the division of dermatology at McMaster University. "These symptoms can last from one to three weeks and can be serious enough that you'll miss work, especially if your face or lungs are affected." Because →

HOW TO SPOT THEM

Poison ivy (see illustration at left) is a common perennial plant found across Canada, except in Newfoundland and the North. Characterized by three broad leaves per stem, it typically grows as a trailing or aerial vine on sandy, stony or rocky shores, in clearings and along the borders of woods and roadsides. Poison sumac grows as a shrub or small tree in southern Quebec and southern Ontario. In Canada, poison oak grows only in southern British Columbia as a vine or shrub.

