Poison Ivy

Every year, thousands of Arkansans, from bird watchers to bowhunters, head into the woodlands to enjoy all The Natural State has to offer. Most will bring back a souvenir from the experience they'd rather not remember. Throughout our state, the forested areas where wildlife is abundant are home to the virulent vine, poison ivy. And once you fall victim to its maddening itch, you will realize why everyone who spends time in the outdoors keeps an eye out for this downright devilish cousin to the cashew family.
Poison Ivy: Facts about the fiend

The rash poison ivy delivers is actually caused by sticky, extremely virulent oil called urushiol. Not only can contact with the plant cause a rash, but urushiol also can be transferred indirectly via contact with anything (clothing, equipment, even pets and downed game). Sensitivity to urushiol oil develops after the first direct skin contact, and an allergic reaction seldom occurs on the first exposure. About 85 percent of all people will eventually develop an allergic reaction when adequately exposed. As with many allergies, sensitivity to this toxin may increase or decrease with age, so the best bet is to stay away, even if you’ve never had a problem with this pesky plant in the past.

Know your enemy

The best protection against poison ivy is recognition. Although it can take on many forms – including a tree-dwelling vine, a bushy shrub and sprawling ground cover – poison ivy can be identified by a few key characteristics. The leaves are separated into three distinct leaflets with smooth or serrated edges and fuzzy undersides. The woody vine has a hairy texture that’s also easily identified. During fall, the plant produces clusters of cream-colored berries (also poisonous) and the leaves may take on a crimson or gold hue.

Should you come into contact with poison ivy, immediately rinse the area suspected of contamination with cold water. Using hot water can increase the severity of the rash by opening the pores of your skin. If you contract a rash, over-the-counter medications like calamine and Benadryl may provide temporary relief, but in severe cases, contact a physician. Cortisone cream or a cortisone injection will reduce discomfort, and if caught early enough, may eliminate the reaction altogether.

Poison ivy pitfalls

One common misconception about poison ivy is that if you scratch the rash or pop the blisters, the rash will spread. The fluid in the blisters does not contain urushiol. Areas that have been lightly exposed or exposed through indirect contact with urushiol on clothing or equipment will begin to break out after the main rash. This gives the appearance that scratching is spreading the rash. However, your fingernails can trap bacteria, which cause infection, so it is best to not scratch, which is easier said than done.

Another common mistake is thinking that poison ivy is no longer a threat in winter when it goes dormant or dies. Although the leaves are gone, urushiol oil is found in all parts of the plant, including the vine and roots, and can remain toxic for months, sometimes years, after the plant’s demise.

Never burn poison ivy to eliminate it. The toxin contained in the plant can be carried in smoke and inhaled. Once inside your system, what otherwise would be an uncomfortable rash could be a life-threatening ailment.