



Oregon Sea Grant Extension  
Sustainable Tourism &  
Outdoor Recreation Program

# Interpretative Fact Sheet

## Poison Oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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# Poison Oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*)

 [tourism.oregonstate.edu/poison-oak-toxicodendron-diversilobum/](https://tourism.oregonstate.edu/poison-oak-toxicodendron-diversilobum/)

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USDA photo

*Don't let Poison Oak and other plants ruin a perfectly good outing.*

**It can only hurt you if you touch it, right? Not necessarily....** Here are a few tips for avoiding problems with Poison Oak.

## Recognize the plant

Poison Oak is commonly found in Oregon and California as a shrub or vine that is up to 12-feet tall.

The old warning 'leaves of three, let them be' is still accurate. **Note:** there could be more than three leaves (like 5 or 7) and the leaves of every variety can look different.

Poison Oak is not a tree—it is a member of the cashew family with hairy under-leaves. The leaves are similar to the rounded lobes of Oregon white oak. Oregon white oaks does not have clumps of leaves in threes (or fives).

## Understanding the danger

All parts of the oak are capable of exuding oil which can cause a rash on most individuals.

The Center for Disease Control indicates that most people are sensitive to the poison oak sap and a tiny amount (equivalent to a grain of table salt) will cause 80-90 percent of adults to rash.

An oily plant sap chemical, *urushiol* triggers an allergic reaction. A reaction can occur within just a few hours.

## Knowing how exposure occurs

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Exposure can occur when brushing up against or damaging the plants like a pet may do. *Urushiol* does not affect pets.

*Urushiol* sap can easily transfer to other objects such as a tool, clothing, pet fur, shoes, and gloves.

Finally, smoke from a burning plant can be a problem. Sap in smoke can impact skin and nasal passages, throat, and lungs and potentially cause very serious allergic reactions.

## Recognizing the symptoms

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The sap causes Contact dermatitis which is the swelling and irritation of the skin. The dermatitis may not show immediately in individuals who have not had previous contact.

**Not everyone will be impacted by Poison Oak.** Everyone, however, can spread the sap and contaminate others.

## Clean up carefully

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Carefully wash fingernails to avoid further spread. Closely trim fingernails to minimize the damage caused by scratching (such as infection).

Wear gloves and use lukewarm water when cleaning surfaces. Use soap and cool water for pets and livestock. Even though pets and livestock do not get the rash, they can easily carry it.

## Controlling the problem

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The sap is quickly absorbed into the skin. Fast treatment (within 20-30 minutes of exposure) is critical. There are several products on the market that work well; some even come in wipes and handy pocket-sizes.

One particular product may not work for everyone or in every case. Be sure to include a variety of items in the First Aid kit including some of those products, antihistamines, oral corticosteroids, and more.

Symptoms may persist for three weeks before subsiding. Poison Oak is not contagious.

## Call 911 as needed

***Don't let something like Poison oak ruin your outing.*** This article is not intended to share or provide medical advice or recommendations. It does share commonly experienced problems, tips and techniques. In other words: Been there. Had the itch. No fun.

**REFERENCES:**

- Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac at <https://www.poison-ivy.org/pacific-poison-oak> check out the great plant identification poster
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Poisonous Plants.” July 7, 2016 at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants/>
- Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife at [https://www.dfw.state.or.us/resources/visitors/docs/Denman\\_WA\\_TrailGuide.pdf](https://www.dfw.state.or.us/resources/visitors/docs/Denman_WA_TrailGuide.pdf)