

Q: What are the differences in Poison Ivy, Oak, and Sumac?

A: Poison ivy usually has 3 broad spoon-shaped leaves or leaflets ("Leaves of 3? Let it be!"), but it can have more. It may grow as a climbing or low, spreading vine that sprawls through grass (more common in the eastern United States) or as a shrub (more common in the northern United States, Canada, and the Great Lakes region).

Poison oak has leaves that look like oak leaves, usually with 3 leaflets but sometimes up to 7 leaflets per leaf group. It grows as a vine or a shrub. Poison oak is more common in the western United States, but it is also found in the eastern United States and, rarely, in the Midwest.

Poison sumac has 7 to 13 leaflets per leaf stem. The leaves have smooth edges and pointed tips. Poison sumac grows as a shrub or small tree. It is found in wooded, swampy areas, such as Florida and parts of other southeastern states, and in wet, wooded areas in the northern United States.

The most common symptoms of a reaction to one of these plants include:

- Itching.
- Red streaks, lines, or general redness where the plant brushed against the skin.
- Small bumps or larger raised areas (hives).
- Blisters filled with fluid that sometimes leaks out.

Less common but more serious symptoms include:

- Swelling of the face, neck, genitals, or eyelids (sometimes to the point of being unable to open the eyes).
- Widespread, large blisters that ooze a lot of fluid.

Home treatment will often relieve symptoms of a mild reaction to these plants. Prescription medicine may be needed to treat more severe reactions.

Q: Our family loves the outdoors. What precautions should we take to avoid Poison Ivy, Sumac, and Oak ?

A: Beyond avoiding contact with the plants, it's a good idea to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts, which can keep urushiol from getting on your skin. (Touch clothing as little as possible when you remove it after hiking, and wash everything before wearing it again.) It's also a good idea to carry moist towelettes and wipe down periodically.