



"Leaves of three, let it be..."

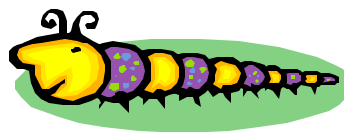
The Poisons of Summer

Poison Ivy.....

Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is a very common plant throughout Virginia. You can identify it by the shiny green leaves, growing in triplets on a vine that may climb or may spread across the ground. The much less common poison oak (*Toxicodendron quercifolium*) is found mainly in low, swampy areas.

Both cause identical problems in those persons who are allergic to the oily resin on the surface of all parts of the plant. About 60% of the US population is sensitive to these plants. For them, contact with poison ivy will cause a rash that usually appears 1-3 days later. At first, the rash is a reddened, very itchy skin area, often arranged in "lines" on the skin that came into contact with the plant's resin. Then many small bumps filled with clear fluid appear. These blisters may leak the clear fluid -- which DOES NOT cause the rash to "spread" to other people or to other skin! Poison ivy's effects are miserable, but not dangerous. The uncomfortable rash may last 2-3 weeks.

Avoid the plant if you are allergic to it. Learn to recognize it, and wear long sleeves and pants if you'll be near it. The plant's resin can be washed off clothes, skin and gear with soap and warm water. **Call the poison center for treatment advice if you've been exposed to poison ivy.** To relieve the itching, you can apply cortisone creams or calamine lotion. Taking Benadryl capsules may help, too. Keep the rashy area clean and dry. Protect any blisters with dry bandages, and try to avoid bursting them. Severe cases of poison ivy may need to be treated with prescription cortisone medicines.



Beware of Caterpillars.....

Did you know that Virginia is home to several species of poisonous caterpillars? These insects have "hairs" on their bodies that can cause a painful sting if they are touched. Many of these stings happen when the victim brushes up against a caterpillar hidden on a tree branch, or underneath the edge of a lawn chair.

Symptoms of a caterpillar sting are very similar to those from a bee sting. There is immediate, sharp pain and then a reddened, slightly itchy spot. Like bee stings, the sting of a caterpillar can cause a serious allergic reaction in sensitive persons. **Call the Virginia Poison Center for treatment advice if someone is stung by a caterpillar.**

Jellyfish Stings.....

Virginia's salt waters are home to jellyfish during the hottest summer months. Swimmers who come into contact with these creatures can get a painful sting. The stings usually cause slightly raised, reddened skin, itching, and a burning sensation. They are *rarely* serious. The recommended treatment involves washing the skin with SALT water (not freshwater!) and gently brushing off any clinging tentacles with a blunt edge like a credit card. Don't touch those tentacles, they can still sting! Applying a paste of baking soda for 15 - 20 minutes may also be helpful. Cortisone cream can then be applied. Itching may be relieved with Benadryl capsules.



Bee or Wasp Stings.....

A NORMAL reaction to a bee or wasp sting will include: intense pain, a whitish bump with a red dot in its center, and swelling *at the site of the sting*. Persons who have other symptoms may be having an allergic reaction and may need an ambulance. ALLERGIC reaction symptoms may include: rapid onset of breathing difficulty, vomiting, fainting, an itchy red rash distributed over the body, or any swelling NOT at the site of the sting. Call an ambulance immediately if you note these allergic reaction symptoms!

If there is a stinger remaining at the site it must be removed. The stinger will look like a small dark thorn. Do not pull it out with tweezers, this would squeeze the venom sac and put more venom into the victim's skin. Instead, gently scrape the stinger off the skin using the edge of a credit card, or the blunt edge of a table knife.

Apply an ice cube to the sting site for 5 to 15 minutes. This will decrease the pain and swelling. Then apply a topical lotion or cream such as calamine, or hydrocortisone. If the sting is on an arm or leg, raising it up high will also help to decrease swelling and pain. **Contact the Poison center for additional treatment advice.**



Black Widow Spiders

The much-feared black widow spider (*lactrodectus mactans*) is a very common resident in our state. A shy creature, this spider prefers to build its untidy web in dark, hidden places such as woodpiles, basements, and in crawl spaces. The female is fairly small and is a shiny black color, with an hour-glass shaped orange or red spot on its belly. Only the bite of the female is poisonous to humans. Symptoms of a bite from this spider are unmistakable. Within several hours, it causes painful cramping in the large muscle groups, often of the abdomen, back and legs. Other effects include sweating, headache, vomiting, restlessness and trembling. The site of the bite is not usually a serious problem: many victims report a sharp, "pinching" pain and two small red fang marks.

You should call the Virginia Poison Center if a spider bite occurs. The experts there can help determine what type of spider it may have been, and advise the correct treatment. There is an antivenin for the black widow's poison, but it is not often given because it has some potentially serious side effects. Death from black widow spider bites is very rare --- there have been none in Virginia for at least several decades.