Poisonous Plants

Safety Meeting Packet

Poisonous plants like poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac grow throughout the United States. This widespread growth puts a number of employees at risk. The employees most at risk for exposure are those who regularly work outdoors. Gardening, landscaping, and forestry are the industries that most often come to mind as having an increased likelihood of coming into contact with poisonous plants. However, construction workers, painters, roofers, and even firefighters can all be exposed to poisonous plants either through direct or indirect contact or inhalation of fumes (wildland firefighters). Employers need to make sure that any employees who may be at risk are aware of potential risks, can identify the plants, and know how to prevent exposure.

Methods of Exposure

Plants like poison ivy spread their poison through direct or indirect contact. When an individual touches the leaves, stem, or berries of these plants, the plant releases urushiol. Urushiol is an oily compound that causes contact dermatitis, or an itchy, painful rash, when it contacts the skin. The majority of adults who come into contact with any of these plants will develop the rash.

Inhalation exposure usually occurs when the plants or parts of the plant are burned whether intentionally or through natural disasters like a wildland or forest fire. This method of exposure is extremely dangerous as the smoke, when inhaled, can form a rash on the interior of the lungs.

Plant Identification

Poison Ivy

There are two main species of poison ivy, eastern poison ivy and western poison ivy. Both species grow clusters of three leaves off a single stem.

In the spring and summer, the leaves are green and appear shiny. In the fall, the leaves change from green to bright red and the plants may develop white or cream-colored flowers or berries.

While the leaves and berries are similar in appearance, eastern poison ivy typically grows as a climbing vine, while western poison ivy can be identified by its shrub-like growth.

Poison Oak

Poison oak can be separated into two different species, eastern poison oak and western poison oak. Both species of poison oak grow in clusters of three leaves which appear oak-like in shape and are covered in small hairs. Poison oak also produces white to cream/yellow berries and flowers.

The biggest difference between poison oak and poison ivy is that eastern poison oak grows more shrub like and western poison oak grows more vine-like. This is the opposite of poison ivy.

Poison Sumac

Poison sumac typically grows in standing water and swampy regions through the Northeast and Southeast United States. However, poison sumac has been known to grow in wetter regions of the Midwest as far west as Minnesota.

Poison sumac is easily identified from poison ivy or poison oak. Poison sumac grows more like a tree than either poison ivy or poison oak and can reach heights of 15-25 feet and diameters upwards of 6 inches. The leaves of poison sumac can grow in excess of 15 inches long and are in clusters of seven to thirteen narrow, oval-shaped leaves.

Symptoms of Exposure

If an individual is exposed to any of these poisonous plants, they may experience symptoms including:

- A red rash within a few days of contact.
- Itching at the site of the rash.
- Bumps, patches, streaks, or weeping blisters (Any fluid from the blisters is not contagious).
- Swelling at the contact site.

First-Aid

Immediately following exposure, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends:

- Using rubbing alcohol or a poison plant wash as the initial rinsing agent. If this is not possible, individuals should use a degreasing soap, like dishwashing soap or a laundry detergent and water, to clean the exposed area. This helps to prevent the urushiol from spreading to another area.
- An individual scrub under the nails with a brush, as any area that may have been exposed needs to be cleaned.
- After washing the affected area, apply a wet compress, calamine lotion, or hydrocortisone cream. This may help to reduce the rash, itching, and blisters.
- In addition to topical treatments, taking an antihistamine may help in relieving some of the itching. However, individuals should be careful, as some antihistamines can cause drowsiness.
- If the rash is extremely severe or spreads to the face or genitals, the individual should seek immediate medical treatment.

Preventative Measures

To prevent exposure to poisonous plants, employees should:

- Wear long sleeves, pants, boots, and gloves. This is especially true if employees are working in areas known to have poisonous plants.
- If exposure does occur, employees should wash their clothes separately in hot water with detergent. This is the best way to ensure that clothes are cleaned of any residual urushiol.
- Employees can also use barrier creams or lotions that contain bentoquatum as means of protection.
- After using tools in locations near poisonous plants, employees should clean the tool surfaces with rubbing alcohol or soap and water, as urushiol can remain active on an object's surface for up to 5 years.
- Employees should wear disposable gloves when cleaning tools, as exposure can occur from indirect contact as well.
- Whenever possible, employees should avoid burning poisonous plants of any kind. If it is unavoidable, OSHA recommends that employees be provided with:
    - A National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)-certified half-face particulate respirator. These respirators should be rated at R-95, P-95, or better. It should be noted that wildland firefighters require higher levels of protection than an R-95 or P-95 rated respirator. For more information regarding respirator and respirator use, please see the Personal Protective Equipment (Respirators) safety material.
- Educate employees on how to identify poisonous plants and what to do if exposure occurs or is suspected. This is one of the best ways to prevent exposure.

For additional information regarding poisonous plant safety, please reference:

- https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/sawmills/poison.html
- https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants/symptoms.html

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Safety Meeting Attendance Acknowledgement

Company Name _____

Department / Division _____

Meeting Date & Time _____ _____ ☐ AM ☐ PM

Meeting Location _____

Name & Title of Individual Conducting Meeting _____

Key Meeting Discussion Points / Important Reminders:

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Internal Procedures Reviewed:

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By signing this document, you confirm your attendance at the meeting and acknowledge the issues addressed above!

Employees in Attendance		
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Employees not present: _____

Suggestions/Recommendations to improve workplace safety and health: _____

Actions Taken: _____

Manager/Supervisor: _____ Date: _____

Disclaimer:

The information provided above was assembled using multiple resources. However, these materials do not contain ALL the information available regarding the required safety standards under local, provincial, state, or federal law for your industry.