Warm weather and long days encourage many people to enjoy outdoor activities during the summer months. However, working in the garden, taking walks with family pets or hiking on weekends can expose people to plants such as poison ivy, oak and sumac—and scratch out fun summer plans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 80-90 percent of adults who come in contact with the oils on these plants will develop a rash[1].

Puneet Chopra, MD, chair and medical director of Observation and Emergency Services at Doctors Community Hospital, helps us identify poisonous plants while sharing helpful tips about treatment and when to get medical care.

**Q: How can people identify poison ivy, oak or sumac?**

All of these plants are local and are usually in brushy or boggy areas. Here are a few reminders about poison ivy, oak and sumac.

**Eastern Poison Ivy**
- Grows on vines in leaves of three
- Has shiny green leaves that may be red in the fall
- May have yellow or green flowers; and white, green, yellow or amber berries

**Poison Oak**
- Shrubs with leaves of three, similar to poison ivy
- May have yellow or green flowers, and clusters of yellow, green or white berries

**Poison Sumac**
- Woody shrubs that have 7-13 leaves growing in pairs along stems
- May have glossy, pale-yellow or cream-colored berries

Q: Do people have to touch these plants to get a rash?
Poison ivy, oak and sumac are covered in an oil that can be transferred through direct contact with their leaves as well as indirect contact. For example, indirect contact can include touching gardening tools or clothing that have oil on them. Even inhaling particles from burning plants may be harmful.

Most people who are exposed to such plants will experience an allergic skin reaction that may include:
- A red rash that forms within a few days of contact and lasts 5-12 days
- Bumps, patches, streaking or weeping blisters (The blister fluids do not spread the rash.)
- Swelling
- Itching

Q: Can people treat the rashes at home?
In most cases, home treatment is best. If a rash forms, apply wet compresses, calamine lotion or hydrocortisone cream to reduce itching and blistering. Oatmeal baths can also provide relief. Over-the-counter antihistamines may help alleviate itching and swelling. Avoid scratching to prevent spreading the oil.

In severe cases (e.g. rash on the face or genitals, or if particles are inhaled), people should seek medical attention. If they experience a severe allergic reaction, including swelling or difficulty breathing, they should call 911 or go to an emergency department immediately.

Q: What are the best ways to prevent rashes from plants?
Always wear long sleeves and pants on walks in wooded areas. Wear gloves when working in gardens or yards. Wash any exposed clothing separately in hot water. Take note of any poisonous plants in yards or on walking paths to avoid contact.

If people believe they’ve been exposed, they should immediately rinse their skin with rubbing alcohol, specialized poison plant washes, or degreasing dish soap and water while remembering to scrub under fingernails.

Find Relief, Fast:
The board-certified emergency medical specialists in Doctors Community Hospital’s Emergency Department are available 24/7. They are trained to treat people who experience severe allergic reactions to plants, foods, chemicals and other factors.

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For more information, visit DCHweb.org/emergency or call 301-DCH-4YOU (301-324-4968).