



SNEEZE GAZETTE™

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Avoid Contact Allergy Problems This Spring and Summer

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Warm weather can increase contact allergy.

Symptoms may appear gradually 48 to 72 hours after exposure.

Have you had a poison ivy reaction (rhus dermatitis) in the past? Like most people, you have a contact allergy to a chemical called urushiol found in poison ivy leaves. Poison ivy is the most common cause of seasonal contact allergy. Contact allergies are delayed skin reactions to chemicals and biological products. Unlike other allergies, these reactions can occur days after exposure and can be mild to severe. The key to avoiding contact allergy is recognizing the trigger to these reactions which can be complicated because reactions do not occur immediately in many cases but rather slowly over 48 to 72 hours.

The warm weather seasons are times when contact allergies are more common, especially poison ivy. Gardening, hiking, walking along trails, even doing the laundry after your kids have wandered through a patch of poison ivy are some of the ways you and your family can inadvertently be exposed. Pets can also bring poison ivy oils into the home. Be on the alert this spring for those dark green shiny leaves in clusters of three, sometimes tinged with red. Teach children to recognize and avoid it. Particularly severe reactions to poison ivy can occur due to inhaling fumes or contact with the face or other sensitive areas. Remember that useful old jingle and share it with your kids: "leaves of three, don't touch me!"

Another common cause of contact allergy is nickel allergy which occurs year-round but may be worse in the warm weather due to increased sweating and more skin exposure. Nickel is commonly used in jewelry and earrings designed for children. Lighter clothing like tanks tops and bathing suits increases the chance of direct contact of the metal with the skin. Jewelry can be covered with a layer of clear nail polish to prevent contact with the skin.

A warm weather contact allergy problem can result from sunscreens which can contain chemicals and stabilizers triggering skin reactions. Topical antibiotics are also a common cause of contact allergy. Some medications such as doxycycline taken by many teenagers for acne can also cause severe skin reactions with exposure to sunlight. Apply all sunscreens, topical antibiotics and lotions to a small area of skin at the beginning of the season particularly if it is a product you have not used before, rather than applying all over exposed areas. Other unexpected skin problems include can occur from contact with the juice of citrus fruits like lime, which cause a



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delayed reaction in the skin upon exposure to sunlight.

Large local reactions to insect bites such as mosquitoes and spiders, also called papular urticaria, can also resemble contact allergy and involve similar mechanisms. These reactions, particularly spider bites, can become severe days after the bite and a physician should be contacted if there are any questions regarding insect allergy or infection. Before venturing outdoors, insect repellent should be applied. Long sleeves and long pants should be mandatory for children hiking in areas where contact allergy or stinging insects or reptiles may be present. *(More about venom allergy can be found in our next Sneeze Gazette™.)*

Usually topical corticosteroids and antihistamines available over-the-counter are adequate for therapy of contact allergy however in severe cases or when infection is present a

physician should be contacted immediately.

Several species of poisonous snakes are also present in Connecticut, and while snake venom is not technically a contact allergen, certainly recognition of this possibility along with avoidance of other contact allergens will ensure a safe and happy outdoor season.

By David Dreyfus MD, PhD

