

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Poison Oak

Date: September 2017

Location: Wherever there is Poison Oak

***"Exposure to poison oak is a rite of passage, we value pain and agony.
The more pain and agony you can achieve, the better firefighter you are."***

Seasoned Firefighter

Have We Normalized Our Exposure to Poison Oak?

Every fire season we hear about poison oak exposure on fire incidents throughout the West. We receive reports about injuries associated with poison oak so frequently that exposure has become routine. Have we normalized our exposure to poison oak?

Is the exposure worth the reward for the amount of people harmed by the urushiol oil their skin and respiratory tract encounter in a season?

The primary culprit for these injuries is Pacific poison oak which is located in California, Oregon, Washington, and Nevada. This potent plant causes a mild to severe rash (except that 15-20 percent of the population is not affected). In severe cases, poison oak exposure can cause difficulty breathing.

Symptoms can take one to six days to appear.

In our wildland firefighting culture we push through as if exposure to poison oak is a badge of honor for slaying the fire beast. It makes us a part of the crew.

Poison Oak Prevents Us from Operating in Our Prime Form

How does that last statement strike you? Is poison oak exposure a rite of passage? Do we not speak up because we don't want to be a weak link in the system?

In actuality, when we are exposed to poison oak and try to suffer through its symptoms that we're experiencing, we become a weak link in the system.

Poison oak exposure prevents us from operating in our prime form, our immune systems are compromised. We are busy scratching and spreading the urushiol over our bodies instead of keeping our head on a swivel.

Our effectiveness is muted—just like our lips to speak up about this situation. Pride prevents us from getting the care we need and, in some cases, from avoiding poison oak altogether.



Pacific poison oak.

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“We have a level of choice in suppression efforts.

Through dialogue we can open up the conversation on the choices in front of us.

Objectives can be met in varying ways. We need to be willing to engage conversation with on-the-ground resources and overhead.

Can our perceived urgency prevent us from stopping and working our way through the objective before us?”

Agency Administrator



Questions and Lessons

- ❖ Is there a way to avoid poison oak exposure and find another route, even at the expense of making the “box” bigger? What if we flagged poison oak the way we flag hazard trees?

If you knew that a crew member would spend the next 15 days in the hospital because they have inhaled poison oak and could have lifelong respiratory issues, would you make a different decision?

- ❖ Have you had a thoughtful discussion about the exposure/risk with leadership and Line Officers regarding the presence of poison oak?

Our leadership and Line Officers will not be able to weigh the risk to firefighters verses the benefit to firefighters if they do not have all the information before them.

- ❖ Just like heat exposure, are we looking out for each other while our heads are digging in the dust?

I may know of your severe reaction and can be eyes-on for you.

We can actively mitigate on behalf of each other, swing wide to avoid a poison oak patch.

- ❖ Is a badge of honor worth the misery and potentially lifelong health ailments?

We may have a minor reaction with short-term health effects or we may have long-term health effects because of a severe reaction. Your body may have a completely different reaction than mine. Do not assume that we are all the same. Plan for the worst.



Am I going to be more valuable for one shift fighting fire in poison oak or am I going to be more valuable over the long run by shifting my tactics to avoid poison oak and be present on my crew for the entire season?

- ❖ What stops you from looking out for your own well-being?

It's not about stopping firefighting; it's about protecting people.

- ❖ Does everyone on your crew know what poison oak looks like? Can they successfully identify poison oak throughout the season as this plant changes?

Pausing throughout the season to show the progression of the poison oak plant provides self-awareness to the crew. Never make an assumption that people know how to identify poison oak. You will likely have someone new on your crew who will not speak up because they are constantly gathering information and don't want to be seen as a weak link.

- ❖ If you have been exposed to poison oak, what steps do you take to prevent spreading the urushiol oil to your personal property and from bringing it home?

A separate changing area at your worksite that isolates contaminated gear is essential to prevent spreading urushiol oil. Having a decontamination area can further reduce the chances of spreading urushiol oil in a work center and bringing it home.



Treating Poison Oak Exposure

Once you have been exposed to poison oak the urushiol oil is easily transferred to various parts of your body and clothing.

Do not put your fingers in your eyes, ears, nose, or mouth. Prior to being decontaminated, do not eat. And do not touch your genitals (bathroom breaks).



Do not use bleach to wash your skin. Its vapors are irritating to your respiratory tract and skin. Additionally, over-the-counter hydrocortisone is not effective. Products with jewelweed, topical antihistamines, benzocaine, neomycin or bacitracin, can cause their own allergic reactions.

Tecnu and Zanfel are effective products to decontaminate your skin. Avoid soaps with moisturizers and oils when showering.

Carefully clean under your fingernails. This is where urushiol easily hides and will be distributed by scratching.

Wash all your gear and, when doing so, wear non-latex disposable gloves (the resin can penetrate latex/rubber). Use grease-cutting dish soap or alcohol for solid objects, and machine wash clothing with regular detergent.

Seek Higher Medical Care If:

- ✓ You are exposed to the smoke of burning poison oak or ivy and there is immediate swelling or you have trouble breathing (anaphylaxis).
- ✓ You have a history of severe reactions.
- ✓ You have severe, uncontrollable itching.
- ✓ You have a rash on the face or genitals—or on more than 30 percent of your body.



Pacific poison oak locations (left); Atlantic poison oak locations (right). Maps courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
Photo shows Pacific poison oak.

Recognizing Poison Oak

When it comes to identifying poison oak, a quick rule of thumb is: ***Leaves of three, beware of me.***

Check out this Wiki on how to identify poison oak: <http://www.wikihow.com/Identify-Poison-Oak>

And for more great information on poison oak, check out this website: [Oregon State University Fact Sheet on Poison Oak](#)



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