

Poison Oak Lecture

By Ben Squire

On July 29 Alameda County Search and Rescue hosted a two hour lecture on the topic of poison oak by Dr. William Epstein from UCSF. Dr. Epstein has spend his career studying poison oak and has worked as a consultant for forestry and fire departments.

As a team that frequently works in and around poison oak (and over and under) we considered ourselves to be already well educated in the topic. Dr. Epstein's lecture served to confirm much of what we already knew. but he also dispelled some popularly held notions and introduced new ideas in poison oak science.

I will attempt to summarize what I found to be the most important points from the lecture:

1. After exposure to poison oak it is best to wash it off immediately with water. According to Dr. Epstein, even though the oil is not water soluble, water can effectively remove much of the decontamination. Commence this rinsing process as soon as possible after the exposure.

2. Solvents such as the commercially available "Tecnu" are effective in removing urushiol oil. Tecnu is a petroleum distillate and is essentially "cheap gasoline." Dr. Epstein recommends isopropyl alcohol as a less expensive and more effective solvent. Don't use it until you are ready to go home though, as it also removes all the lipids from your skin that provide a natural barrier to poison oak.

3. Don't forget to decontaminate your clothes and boots. Clothes should be placed in the washer. Boots are best decontaminated using a solvent.

4. The "Tecnu Armor" barrier cream is not very effective. The barrier preparations Dr. Epstein recommends are either "StokoGard Outdoor Cream" (which reportedly smells like dead fish) or the more pleasant smelling "Ivy Block" which is an organo clay containing cream.

5. For severe cases of poison oak dermatitis, a two week course of prednisone is effective. For his patients, Dr. Epstein prefers to use a two day course of high dose dexamethasone. For a mild or moderate case. a fluorinated corticosteroid cream such as Lidex may prevent further progression. (these are all prescript ion treatments)

6. Despite what the packaging says, OTC hydrocortisone is NOT effective. Calamine lotion. oatmeal soaks. or just plain water should be used because they may be comforting and are not expensive. Antihistamines are of little use except as a sedative to aid in sleep.

7. In the past, preventative measures have been available that contain purified urushiol oil for hyposensitization. but this has been taken off the market. A vaccine is in the works but has not yet been tested on humans.

I want to thank Alameda County SAR for organizing this event and inviting us and Dr. William Epstein for his lifetime of work and his entertaining and informative presentation.

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