

Seasonal Plant and Insect Hazards Encountered During Trail-running Activities

Spring, Summer, and Fall can be the time of year for **Plant and Insect-based Outdoor Seasonal Hazards**. You may be exposed to these hazards in your trail-running and other recreational activities, or during your yard-maintenance activities.

As Dorothy (from Kansas) says, “poison ivy, mosquitoes, and ticks, oh my!”

Note: I’m exposing myself to these hazards at least 5 times per week with my own personal “recreational activities” in the woods, so I have some experience here that I can pass along.

POISON IVY:

This is what most young poison ivy plants (in this area) looks like:



Poison Ivy is a woody vine that is well known for its ability to produce urushiol, a skin irritant that causes an itching rash for most people, technically known as urushiol-induced contact dermatitis. This dermatitis can also spread to other parts of their bodies or other individuals, with contact.

Appearance:

The color ranges from light green (usually the younger leaves) to dark green (mature leaves), turning bright red in fall. The leaflets of mature leaves are somewhat shiny. The leaflets are 3-12 cm long, rarely up to 30 cm. Each leaflet has a few or no teeth along its edge, and the leaf surface is smooth. Leaflet clusters are alternate on the vine, and the plant has no thorns. These three characteristics: (a) clusters of three leaflets, (b) alternate, and (c) lack of thorns, are sufficient to positively identify the plant. If it is growing up the trunk of a tree, the presence of copious root-hairs will identify it, leading to the "hairy vine, no friend of mine" warning. **Keep in mind that contact with these “hairy vines” (even in the wintertime) can cause an outbreak of dermatitis.**

If you are susceptible to poison ivy, there are some things you can do when exposed. If you think you might have come in contact with the dreaded leaves, always wash those areas of skin, and use a washcloth and "appropriate" cleanser. Never touch the washcloth to other parts of your body after washing these exposed areas. By "appropriate cleanser", you

should use a decent liquid "**detergent**," not a soap. A liquid detergent will wash-away the urushiol. Dawn hand-dishwashing soap works well, or you can purchase specific poison ivy cleaning products at a drugstore. (There are also "barrier" products available that help to prevent contact).

More poison ivy information: [This site](#) has information on post-exposure treatment. **In my experience, the most important thing you can do for yourself is to clean exposed areas with liquid detergent (to keep the poison ivy's oil from spreading) as soon as possible, BEFORE you get treated with cortisone, etc.**

Some poison ivy related products available over-the-counter at the drug store:



Outside of this area of the Midwest, [Poison Oak](#) and [Poison Sumac](#) are also urushiol-based hazards. Familiarize yourself to the appearance of these plants before traveling to trail runs in their habitats.

MOSQUITOES:



As you may already know, mosquito bites may carry viruses such as West Nile virus, which can cause serious illness and sometimes even death. If you spend a great deal of time in the outdoors, (especially if you are not moving very quickly), you might be wise to apply an insect repellent.

Prevention:

In the United States, we have two (effective) main active ingredients to choose from as mosquito repellent. Of the active ingredients registered with the EPA, CDC believes that two have demonstrated a higher degree of efficacy in the peer-reviewed, scientific literature. Products containing these active ingredients typically provide longer-lasting protection than others:

- **DEET (N,N-diethyl-m-toluamide)**
- **Picaridin (KBR 3023)**

For years, we only had DEET as an effective choice. Some people have a higher sensitivity to DEET and their skin reacts to it. For those folks, Picaridin is a good choice. You can find it in such products as Cutter Advanced, etc. Read labels before purchasing, if you're not sure.

[More information from the CDC](#)

Permethrin is very effective for repelling both mosquitoes and ticks, but should never be applied to your skin. Its use is reserved as a treatment of clothing and equipment only, and provides protection against mosquitoes and ticks through multiple washings. Follow label instructions. There are also clothing brands that have permethrin already applied to them, such as Buzz-off brand, etc.

TICKS:



Ticks are blood-feeding parasites that are often found in tall grass and shrubs where they will wait to attach to a passing host. Physical contact is the only method of transportation for ticks. Ticks do not jump or fly, although they may drop from their perch and fall onto a host. They can also crawl onto the host from the ground.

Ticks are important vectors of a number of diseases. For humans, ticks can transmit human diseases such as Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and Colorado tick fever in this area of the country. All of these are serious diseases.

If you find a tick on your skin, rapid removal is the best course of action.

Tick Removal:

To remove a tick use a small set of tweezers: grab the head, pulling slowly and steadily. There are a number of manufacturers that have produced tweezers specifically for tick removal. Crushing or irritating the tick (by heat or chemicals) should be avoided, because these methods may cause it to regurgitate its stomach contents into the skin, increasing the possibility of infection of the host. Tiny larval ticks (known as "seed ticks" in this area) can usually be removed using a special tick remover. Lyme disease found in deer ticks cannot

be transmitted once the body is removed. For “seed ticks,” I use baby wipes, and rub vigorously to remove them. (I have on occasion used duct tape, too).

The first sign of a Lyme disease infection is usually a circular rash called erythema migrans or EM. This rash occurs in approximately 70-80% of infected persons and begins at the site of a tick bite after a delay of 3-30 days. A distinctive feature of the rash is that it gradually expands over a period of several days, reaching up to 12 inches (30 cm) across. ALWAYS seek medical treatment, if you have any symptoms such as these.

Tick Repellents:

The CDC recommends repellents with 20 – 50% DEET may offer best, well-rounded protection from ticks. From my personal experience, I haven’t had much luck with DEET repelling ticks, (although it works well for mosquitoes). Permethrin-treated clothing is very effective though, for repelling both mosquitoes and ticks, but should never be applied to your skin. Its use is reserved as a treatment of clothing and equipment, only. Here’s a [permethrin product](#) that you can purchase and [instructions on how to apply it](#).

[More information about Lyme Disease](#)

[All tick-borne diseases](#)

[Tick Encounter Resource Center](#)