

Safety Note #87

FIELDWORK SAFETY: TOXIC PLANTS



Western Poison Oak
Photograph Courtesy California
Poison Control System

Toxic plants can cause mild to severe dermatitis or other reactions when plant sap, fluids, or thorns come into contact with exposed skin or other tissues. California toxic plants include weeping fig, poison oak, chrysanthemum, geranium, ivy, century plant, crown of thorns, primrose, and firethorn.

Symptoms of dermatitis typically develop within 24 to 48 hours after exposure and include redness, blistering, swelling, and aggravated itching of skin exposed to toxic plants.

Reactions to toxic plant secretions or thorns depend on the individual's sensitivity, degree of exposure, and where on the body the toxic exposure occurs. For example, toxic plant exposures to sensitive eye tissue usually cause relatively more severe reactions than exposures to other body areas.

The following fieldwork precautions should be taken to prevent contracting or treat dermatitis from toxic plants:

- The best defense against acquiring dermatitis or other reactions from toxic plants is not to come into contact with them. Accordingly it is prudent practice to be able to readily recognize and thereby avoid, toxic plants that may occur in the fieldwork area.
- Learn to recognize toxic plants in the fieldwork area by studying a plant field guide or other similar plant identification materials.
- Wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants with boots in the field. Tucking your pants into your boots or socks helps prevent toxic plant contact with your skin.
- Closely look for toxic plants before touching objects such as rock outcrops or trees or picking up objects from the ground (i.e. rocks, plants, leaves, remote monitoring equipment, etc.).
- Thoroughly inspect the area where you intend to sit.
- If you develop dermatitis from a toxic plant, treat the affected area by: washing with soap and water; rinsing with large amounts of water; and drying with a clean cloth.
- Promptly change clothing that has been exposed to toxic plants. Handle contaminated clothing carefully. Wash contaminated clothing several times in unmixed laundry loads.
- Never scratch an area of skin affected by dermatitis.
- Seek professional medical help if dermatitis induced by contact with a toxic plant does not improve or worsens.