

## Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

What are some of the top skin rashes people may experience during the summer months?

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As people go back out into the world in the summer months and the warm weather invites us out of our homes, we can come into contact with different things that can cause skin issues. One of the things people can run into are toxic plants. So people can get rashes from things like poison ivy that their skin may become exposed to. Now here in West Texas, we don't usually have to deal with that much poison ivy, there's more poison ivy in eastern parts of Texas. However, there is a little bit of a trick that can get played on you. If you are buying plants from a nursery, those plants might have been grown and moved from an area that has endemic poison ivy. And at the very base of some of those plants, there may be a few sprigs of the poison ivy plant that could still cause you problems in terms of the rash of poison ivy.

Is poison ivy becoming more dangerous?

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Recently, we've discovered that poison ivy is becoming more populous because of increasing temperatures and it's also having a greater concentration of the toxic oil called urushiol that's in the leaves that causes the rash. So you might have more of a significant rash after exposure to poison ivy than previously, and about 80% of people will get a rash when they're exposed to poison ivy.

Why are some people affected by poison ivy and others are not?

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Poison Ivy can cause an allergic contact dermatitis. And most people who are exposed to the leaves of poison ivy will get a rash from it, but not everybody will make that allergy. So about 80% of people who are exposed to poison ivy get a rash 20% of people just don't have the right genetics to make an allergy to that plant. So those lucky people can do whatever they want with poison ivy. But for the rest of us leaves of three, it's better for us to let it be.

What does poison ivy rash look like and what are the symptoms?

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The rash of poison ivy often looks like little blisters, sometimes in a line, because we get exposure from plants when they brush up against our skin. And so we can have a line of blisters that occurs on our exposed areas of skin or small blisters in places where we've made contact. The rash is extremely itchy because it's an allergic type of dermatitis, a very brisk one in fact, but that's why it makes blisters. You can spread the oils as well underneath the fingernails if you've come in contact with poison ivy, so it's a good idea to clean those fingernails very carefully. There's actually a soap called Ivy Block that can help make sure that you get all the little last traces of that oil out from under your fingertips so that you're not inadvertently putting it into more places.

What is the best treatment for poison ivy?

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If you do get poison ivy and it's a relatively significant case, you may need a treatment like prednisone or systemic steroids. For milder cases topical steroids are often effective, along with anti histamines to

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help with the itch and potentially help people sleep. Some patients get comfort from Calamine topically or oatmeal baths like you might consider using also for a sunburn.

## What is sun poisoning?

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Sun poisoning is more than a really bad sunburn, it actually can cause significant internal symptoms, and trouble regulating temperature as well as troubles with blood pressure and heart rate. So if you have been out in the sun for a long time, and have gotten dehydrated and are starting to feel lightheaded and weak, you may be experiencing sun poisoning, which is a bit of an urgent condition, you need to get somewhere cool, drink some water to hydrate yourself and pay attention to how you feel. Because after somebody gets a little bit more exposure to the sun, they can progress to something called a sun stroke, which can be quite catastrophic.

## What is the treatment for sun poisoning? Can it be avoided?

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The way to avoid sun poisoning is to be sun smart. So you have to think about how much time you're spending in the sun, especially if it's direct sunlight, you'd have to think about ways you can protect yourself from those high temperatures and UV radiation. I like to think about my sun care protection as a football team, where my sunscreen is the quarterback, but he can't do the whole job by himself. So I also like to incorporate some protective clothing such as hats and long sleeves with breathable fabric. And I like to think about sun smarts, avoiding the sun from the most peak hours of sun exposure that's usually 10am to 2pm. And thinking about seeking shade during those times. You also want to make sure that you're very well hydrated when you're out in the sun because you will be sweating to help keep yourself cool. You're losing water faster than you think you are. And dehydration worsens all the symptoms of sun poisoning and sun toxicity.

## What is heat rash?

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There are many different types of heat rash. The most common type is when we call miliaria. That can occur when you're sweating. And the openings to the sweat ducts get a little bit backed up sort of like our highway system around 5pm or 8am in the morning, and when that happens, that moisture can come out of the sides of the ducts and they can cause inflammation in the skin. So that can create a condition called miliaria rubra which just means red bumps around the openings of those hair follicles. It's very itchy and uncomfortable. Other heat rashes that can occur can be because of an imbalance in our skin flora. So we can overgrow yeast that lives on our skin normally, but it can become uncomfortable and very inflamed if we have that imbalance that favors the yeast overgrowth because our immune system really does not like yeast, and if it sees it attacks it very rigorously, so we get a lot of inflammation, a lot of erythema, that's redness, a lot of pain. Usually, you know, you have that yeast rash because it has a characteristic yeasty smell. And you can treat it with anti yeast treatments, which can be available over the counter.

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### What should someone do if a heat rash does not go away?

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Anytime that you have a rash that occurs that you cannot get better, or if it's getting worse, it's always appropriate to seek medical attention. Your primary care physician, or your dermatologist should be able to help you find the right medicine to get you feeling much better.

### What should people know about insect bites?

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Insect bites are one of the small scourges of the summertime. And it's one of the prices of admission in a way for us enjoying the great outdoors. But minimizing your exposure to insects is a smart move. You can do that by using appropriate pesticides for your age and medical condition. You can use protective clothing, there are some that actually have pesticide in the fabric.

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The more skin that's exposed, the more likely you are to get bitten or stung. So you do want to think about protecting yourself in that way. And then avoiding places where there are going to be lots of insects, tall unruly grass, places where there's brush and things that you're not familiar with, to potentially be places where you might come in contact with insects.

### What should people know about ticks specifically?

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So avoiding tick bites is a smart move in the summertime because some of the ticks will carry diseases like Lyme disease, Lyme disease is caused by a little bacteria that lives in the tick. And when it bites us, it gives that bacteria to us as a little gift that can make us very, very sick. And so it's best to prevent that by using appropriate pesticides for the area that you're in and protecting your skin with long pants and sleeves. And potentially even tucking those pants into the socks. After a long day of hiking or being out in nature, it's a good idea to do a tick check where a buddy checks you to make sure that there's no ticks on your skin that you're unaware of. because believe it or not those little critters they have an anesthetic substance in their saliva so that when they bite us, we don't feel it. So if it's not in a place you can see you might not discover the tick for a while. Now the good news is the ticks have to be on your body for a long time to transmit that little bacteria that makes us sick. So if you can get them off relatively quickly, you might not have to have the antibiotic prophylaxis for that condition.

### How can people take better care of their skin during the summer?

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When we're thinking about our skin in the summertime, we want to remember what a big job it has to do for us over the course of a long hot summer. It has to keep us cool it has to protect us from the environment, and it has to get us from June to August without too much difficulty so we want to protect it from the sun. We want to cleanse it gently and we want to moisturize it to restore moisture after a long day out at the beach.