

Health Unit Media Release

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Be Aware of Poisonous Weeds

Some poisonous weeds can grow in areas where humans are working or doing recreational activities. Human skin coming in contact with these weeds can result in serious burns and rashes. The key is to be familiar with the ways to protect yourself and your family so you can enjoy the outdoors and be safe.

- Teach the entire family to become familiar with the plants, know them by sight and avoid contact with them if possible.
- When working around these weeds wear goggles, rubber gloves, rubber boots and coveralls. Thoroughly wash boots and gloves with soap, water and a scrub brush before taking off protective clothing.
- If you have been exposed to any of these plants, you should wash affected area immediately with soap and cold water and avoid direct exposure to sunlight and seek medical advice.

WHICH WEEDS CAN CAUSE AN ADVERSE SKIN REACTION IN HUMANS?

WILD PARSNIP

During much of July, August and early September wild parsnip is one of the most visible yellow-flowered weeds in roadside ditches, public recreation areas, around sports fields, fence rows, and along railroad tracks. It may also be present on residential properties. This is a highly branched plant, with hollow green stems where the yellow flower is held high above the leaves.

For more information on Wild Parsnip, visit: <http://www.ontarioweeds.com/weed.php?w=PAVSA>

GIANT HOGWEED

This species usually grows from 2.5 to 4 metres (8 to 14 feet) high with leaves up to 1 metre (3 feet) in breadth. It has thick, 5 to 10 centimetres (2 to 4 inches) hollow stem. Its stem and the undersides of its leaves are covered in coarse hairs. Its large, umbrella-shaped flowers are white in colour and can be more than 30 centimetres (1 foot) in diameter. The seeds of Giant Hogweed are flattened and oval in shape. This plant produces a clear, toxic watery sap that causes skin to burn. It can be found at Roadsides, stream banks, waste areas and other scattered locations.

For more information on Giant Hogweed, visit: <http://www.ontarioweeds.com/weed.php?w=HERMZ>

POISON IVY

It is distinguished by its low growth or its occasional climbing habit, its 3 leaflets in each compound leaf, its leaves deep green in summer, reddish in spring and fall, its clusters of whitish to greenish-yellow berries, and its short, erect, leafless stems which frequently retain a few berries all winter long. Poison-ivy is sometimes mistakenly called Poison-oak because some plants have very coarsely toothed or lobed leaflets. The true Poison-oak, *Rhus toxicodendron* occurs in the southern United States, but not in Canada.

For more information on Poison Ivy, visit: <http://www.ontarioweeds.com/weed.php?w=TOXRA>

WHY DO THESE WEEDS CAUSE ADVERSE SKIN REACTION IN HUMANS?

- Wild parsnip and giant hogweed contain chemicals that cause burning of the skin. When absorbed by skin, these chemicals are energized by ultraviolet light (during sunny and cloudy days). They destroy cells and skin tissue, though the reaction may take time to be noticeable. In mild cases,

affected skin reddens and feels sunburned. In more severe cases, the skin reddens first, then blisters rise -- some are large -- and for a while the area feels like it has been scalded. Places where skin is most sensitive (arms, legs, torso, face, neck) are in danger. Sweating can bring this on sooner.

- All parts of Poison-ivy, including the roots, contain a poisonous substance which causes an irritating inflammation of the skin of most people, the inflamed areas frequently developing blisters and accompanied by intense itchiness. The poisonous substance is an oily resin contained in the juice of the plant.
- The sap/oils are inside the plant and will transfer to the person through broken parts (stocks/stems) of the plant.

So the bottom line is... know your weeds and what to do if you come in contact with them. Prevent reactions, learn to recognize plants that can cause an adverse skin reaction, avoid touching the plants, wear protective clothing if you do have to handle the plants, and always shower immediately after handling the plants to remove the sap/oils from your skin. Pets can also carry the sap/oils on their fur and transfer the sap/oils to people through petting so be aware of where your pet has wandered.

Check the Health Unit website or call the Health ACTION Line for contact information for weed inspectors:

- United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, contact Weed Inspector, Larry Sudds at 613-342-3840
- Lanark County, contact Weed Inspector, Tom Guindon at the Public Works Department at (613) 267-1353 or Toll Free: 1-888-952-6275.

Call for information on poisonous plants and what to do if you have been in contact with them:

- Invading Species Hotline at 1-800-563-7711
- Telehealth 1-866-797-0000
- Health ACTION Line 1-800-660-5853 (or local 613-345-5685)

More information about poisonous weeds and photos of the plants for identification:

<http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/hort/news/hortmatt/2010/20hrt10a4.htm>

Information on all weeds found in Ontario:

<http://www.ontarioweeds.com/weedIndex.php#w>

Information for landowners and managers:

<http://www.invadingspecies.com>

General information on health and environmental hazards:

<http://www.healthunit.org/hazards/dangerousweeds.html>