

Ask Dr. Mikell

By Dr. Oswald Mikell

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Summer rashes and bites

With the summer heat at full blast - isn't always fun in the sun. Intense sunlight, hot and humid temperatures, poisonous plants and biting insects can cause a host of skin summer problems.

Q: Lately when I'm exposed to the heat I develop a rash – what is it and what can I do about it?

A: It could be heat rash. This happens when the body gets too hot and can't evaporate sweat fast enough. The sweat ducts become plugged and trap perspiration beneath the skin causing clusters of red spots or small, blister-like bumps that are extremely itchy. Typically, you'll find this in skin folds or wherever clothing causes friction. Try to dress in soft, lightweight, loose-fitting cotton clothing and avoid powders and heavy creams that can block skin pores. Once the rash appears, try to keep your skin cool, apply cold water compresses, calamine lotion or over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream.

Q: I've been working in my yard and developed a rash that I think is poison ivy. How should it be treated?

A: Direct contact with poison ivy and poison oak causes red, swollen skin, blisters and severe itching within days or weeks of exposure. If you realize that you have made contact you should immediately wash with soap and water. For a mild rash, cool showers, oatmeal baths, calamine lotion or hydrocortisone cream can relieve symptoms. For severe rashes, or rashes that involve the face, eyes or genitals, you should call a physician. Prescription medications may be needed to reduce itching and swelling.

Q: I finally got to the beach for the first time this year, but afterwards I developed a rash on my chest and neck that looks like red pimples and blisters. I'm fair skinned and prone to burn, but this is something different. Do I have sun poisoning?

A: It sounds like it could be PMLE (Polymorphous Light Eruption) which appears shortly after exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun or commercial tanning beds and is often mistaken for sun poisoning. PMLE is a reaction that light-sensitive people like yourself may have after their first few exposures to sunlight each year. Treat the affected areas with a cool compress, hydrocortisone cream and try anti-inflammatory medications. PMLE usually clears up on its own in seven to ten days; however, if the rash does not improve you should consult a physician.

Q: Every summer I end up with bug bites. I've heard you shouldn't scratch them – is this true?

A: Mosquitoes, chiggers, and ticks bites are quite common in summer as these insects are drawn to the heat. These bites can cause a nasty, itchy little rash so it is always best to protect yourself with insect repellent. If you are bitten and develop a rash, the best way to treat it is to try not to scratch it, because scratching it can cause an infection. Most insect bites will clear up on their own, but if it does persist and you start to develop an infection or a fever, you should call a physician right away.

Summer is a time to relax and enjoy yourself, but unfortunately summer activities increase the risk of skin rashes. Too much heat or exposure to insects and certain plants can cause extremely irritating and itchy rashes – and if left untreated can cause more serious problems. If you find yourself with a rash or insect bite that is not healing promptly, call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry (843) 689-5259. Our experienced staff will identify the exact rash or bite and provide the proper treatment.