

## PICA

Pica is an eating disorder in which an individual has cravings for and eats things which are not food. Many young children put nonfood items in their mouths, particularly babies who are exploring their environment, and this is considered normal. If, however, the behavior continues beyond the age when it is developmentally appropriate, usually beyond 18-24 months, pica might be considered. Pica is also considered when an individual persists in eating nonfood substances for at least a month. Pica is most common in individuals who have a developmental disability or a brain injury which affects their development.

Nonfood items which individuals with pica often crave include:

- Animal droppings
- Baking soda
- Buttons
- Chalk
- Clay
- Cigarette butts & ashes
- Coffee grounds
- Dirt
- Feces
- Glue
- Hair
- Ice
- Insects
- Leaves
- Paint chips
- Paper
- Pebbles
- Plaster
- Sand
- Soil
- Soap
- String
- Toothpaste

Causes of pica are unknown, but risk factors for pica include:

- Developmental disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, autism or brain abnormalities
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Environmental deprivation (Hunger can result in pica)
- Low socioeconomic status
- Epilepsy
- Maternal deprivation, parental neglect, child abuse

- Mental health conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), schizophrenia
- Dieting (People may eat nonfood substances to get a feeling of fullness)
- Pregnancy

An individual who consumes nonfood items may be at risk for serious health problems including:

- Lead poisoning (from eating paint chips in older buildings with lead-based paint)
- Bowel problems (from eating indigestible substances like hair, cloth, etc.)
- Intestinal obstruction or perforation (from eating objects that could get lodged in the intestines)
- Dental injury (from eating hard substances that could harm the teeth)
- Parasitic infections (from eating dirt or feces)<sup>i</sup>

These conditions are often discovered through diagnostic tests which include imaging studies used to identify ingested materials and aid in the management of gastrointestinal (GI) tract complications of pica and may include:

- Abdominal radiography
- Upper and lower GI barium examinations
- Upper GI endoscopy<sup>ii</sup>

A physician may check for anemia or other nutritional deficiencies.

There is no specific medical treatment for pica. If the condition is due to nutritional deficiencies, these may be corrected. Management of pica generally consists of behavioral strategies. The individual is educated on what is acceptable (food) and what is unacceptable (non-food) substances. Ways to restrict nonfood items which the individual craves are explored, and may include storing the craved items in a locked cabinet or a high shelf. Individuals should be offered a well-balanced diet. Medication may also be prescribed if pica is associated with significant behavioral problems related to the individual's disability.

For most, pica is a temporary condition, although for individuals with developmental or mental health issues, it can be a more prolonged concern.

#### References:

Kids Health.org, KidsHealth from Nemours, Pica, January 2011  
 Medscape: Drugs, Diseases & Procedures, Pica, July 18, 2013

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<sup>i</sup> <http://kidshealth.org/PageManager>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/914765-overview>