

PICA Awareness

Factsheet



What is PICA?

Pica is an eating disorder that involves eating items that are not typically thought of as food and that do not contain significant nutritional value, such as hair, dirt, and paint chips.

Origins of the word

The term pica originates in the Latin word for magpie, Picave, a bird that is famed for its unusual eating behaviours, where it is known to eat almost anything.

What is PICA?

It is unclear how many people are affected by pica. It most likely is more prevalent in developing countries.

- Pica can affect children, adolescents, and adults of any genders
- Pica can be associated with intellectual disability, trichotillomania (hair pulling disorder), and excoriation (skin picking) disorder

Signs & symptoms

- Witnessing eating a food that is not edible such as stones or metal
- Stomach upset and/or pain
- Blood in stool
- Bowel problems (constipation or diarrhoea)

Poisoning

Other serious symptoms of Pica occur as a result of ingesting toxic and poisonous items such as:

- Household cleaning products
- Toxic plants in the garden
- Animal poisons left around the house or garden

Physical injury

Results from eating some toxins or bacteria from non-food items, such as:

- Intestinal blockage
- Injuries to teeth
- Infections

Neurological causes

Often occurs with other mental health disorders associated with impaired functioning.

- Autism, OCD or developmental disabilities
- Schizophrenia
- Brain Injury
- Seeking comfort (self harm)

Biological causes

Malnutrition leading to iron or zinc deficiencies.

- Deficiencies in iron or zinc can trigger specific cravings however, the non-food items craved usually don't supply the minerals lacking in the person's body

Sensory causes

Hypo sensitivity leading to non food items fill the sensory need (strong tastes/smell – like soap) or rough textures like sand.

- Linked to ASD and other sensitivity disorders

Cultural/Social causes

- In some cultures, eating non-food items is learned as part of the culture or religious practice
- Food may not be regularly available, and a person may attempt to ease their hunger by eating non-food substances to get a feeling of fullness (tissues make you feel full for example)

Emotional regulation causes

- Manage anxiety or self-soothe. Chewing or sucking on clothes for example can create a sense of comfort
- The sensation of biting down on a particular substance may be satisfying



Behavioural factors

Cases of pica are up to 25% more common in those with:

- Learning Disabilities
- OCD – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- ASD – Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Diagnosis

There are no laboratory tests for pica. Instead, the diagnosis is made from a clinical history of the patient.

Diagnosing pica should be accompanied by tests for anaemia, potential intestinal blockages, and toxic side effects of substances consumed (i.e., lead in paint, bacteria or parasites from dirt).

Substances of choice

Typical substances ingested tend to vary with age and availability. They may include paper, soap, cloth, hair, string, wool, soil, chalk, talcum powder, paint, gum, metal, pebbles, charcoal, ash, clay, starch, or ice.

Generally, those with pica are not averse to ingesting food.

Assessment

- Will involve the main carer
- Recording charts can be used to establish why an individual is eating inedible objects
- Look for any pattern of behaviour
- Analogue or situation tests may be used to establish what is causing the pica behaviour

Safe environment management

- Is the current environment a fit and proper place for the person to live?

Behavioural strategies

- Reduce anxiety
- Edible alternatives
- Safe stimulation (chew items etc)
- Patterns of behaviour, de-escalation & diversion
- Structured activities
- Increased communication & education
- Discrimination training

Managing the risk

A diagnosis of Pica suggests that there are additional risks that need to be considered.

The risk of ingesting harmful substances and the consequences associated with that are significantly increased.

Undetermined

There could be a diagnosis of Pica if the individual continues to ingest non-food items however, there is no current danger.

Serious

On one occasion only, the individual has passed a foreign object, such as stones, in their stool, spat out or even choked on a foreign object.

Dangerous

There has been more than one episode of passing foreign objects through stool, spitting out or choking on foreign objects.

Highly dangerous

This would include having more than one episode of passing foreign objects AND needing surgery due to ingesting foreign objects on one occasion.

Life threatening

The individual has needed more than one surgery due to ingesting foreign objects.