

Learning About Pica



What is it?

Pica is an eating disorder. People with pica eat things that aren't food, such as chalk, dirt, hair, paint, or paper. It can happen in children older than 2 years and in teens and adults. It happens more in children than in teens or adults. Pica is more common in people with autism spectrum disorder and developmental or intellectual disabilities. It also can happen when a person is pregnant.

Depending on what things the person eats, the health risk may be small. But eating certain things can be dangerous or even deadly.

What causes it?

Often the cause of pica isn't known. But it may be a sign of a lack of certain nutrients or of poor nutrition.

What are the symptoms?

People with pica eat things that aren't food. This can result in stomach pain, constipation, or diarrhea. If the person eats sharp or hard things, there may be tooth pain, mouth pain, or other mouth problems. In some cases, there are no symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will do an exam and ask about eating behaviors. You may be asked about mental illness, developmental disability, or intellectual disability.

Your doctor also may want to do blood tests to look for a lack of some nutrients, such as iron, zinc, or calcium. You may also be checked for lead poisoning. Your doctor may order an X-ray or other scan of the belly. This can help look for objects or problems in the digestive tract.

How is it treated?

In some cases, pica stops on its own. Children may outgrow it. If there's an illness or health problem caused by eating things that aren't food, such as an infection, ulcer, lead poisoning, or mouth injury, that will be treated. The doctor may refer the person to a behavioral or mental health professional.

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