

# PICA



## What is pica?

Pica is craving and eating non-food items, where:

- ◆ The cravings are strong and hard to resist
- ◆ The behavior lasts more than a month
- ◆ The behavior is not appropriate for a person's age or stage of development.

## Why do we care about pica?

Pica can cause serious health problems, such as:

- ◆ Lead poisoning (from eating paint chips or dirt with lead)
- ◆ Digestive tract problems (from eating things that are sharp or can't be digested)
- ◆ Parasites (from eating contaminated dirt)
- ◆ Tooth damage (from eating things that are hard or rough)
- ◆ Nutrition problems (when non-food items take the place of the nutrients in healthy food).

## Who is more likely to have pica?

- ◆ Young children
- ◆ People with mental illness or developmental disabilities, including autism and mental retardation
- ◆ Pregnant women

It is normal for young children to explore the world by putting all kinds of things in their mouths. It may be pica if a child over the age of two keeps on eating non-food items.

Sometimes pregnant women crave non-food items, such as clay. The mother's pica can hurt her unborn baby. Poisons like lead can pass from mother to baby, and nutrition problems can hurt a baby's growth and development.



**Contra Costa Lead Poisoning Prevention Project**

[www.cchealth.org/lead-poison](http://www.cchealth.org/lead-poison) ◆ [fix-lead@hsd.cccounty.us](mailto:fix-lead@hsd.cccounty.us)

## What kind of things do people with pica crave and eat?

Dirt	Baking soda	Soap
Clay	Cornstarch	Paper
Paint chips	Coffee grounds	Burnt match heads
Plaster	Hair	Sand
Laundry starch	Cigarette butts/ashes	Chalk
Ice	Toothpaste	and other non-food items

## What causes pica?

We don't yet know. Some scientists believe pica cravings are the body's way to get vitamins and minerals that are too low in the diet. Others believe that stress is a cause.

In some cases, pica may be a learned behavior passed down in families or cultures. For example, in some parts of the United States women may eat clay while pregnant.

## Is there a medical test for pica?

No. The doctor diagnoses pica by behavior. The doctor may test for anemia or for levels of nutrients such as iron or zinc. A blood lead test is important if someone has been eating paint chips or dirt, or items that might have lead dust.

## What is the treatment for pica?

Pica is usually temporary and gets better as children get older, or after a woman's pregnancy. Pica can be long-lasting for those with mental illness or developmental disabilities.

Medical treatment depends on what items are being eaten. It may include treatment for lead poisoning, nutrition problems, anemia, or parasites. The doctor may talk about how to teach a child the difference between food and non-food items, and how to keep them away from the non-food items they crave. The doctor may make a referral to a psychologist or other mental health specialist for behavioral treatment or medication.



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