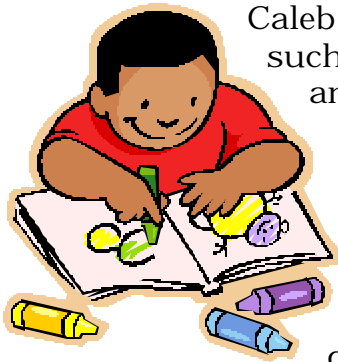


Pica



Caleb, a young boy with autism, would repeatedly place items such as little beads, small toys, sand, and dirt in his mouth and would often swallow them.

During her pregnancy, Laura craved not pickles and ice cream but soap. Frightened by this strange urge, she called her doctor.

Caleb and Laura were diagnosed with pica, an eating disorder characterized by persistent and compulsive cravings to eat non food items that last for 1 month or longer.

What is Pica?

The name “pica” comes from the Latin word magpie, a bird known for its large and indiscriminate appetite.

Persons with pica most frequently crave and consume non-food items such as dirt, clay, paint chips, plaster, chalk, cornstarch, laundry starch, baking soda, coffee grounds, cigarette ashes, burnt match heads, cigarette butts and rust. Glue, hair, buttons, paper, sand, toothpaste, soap, oyster shells, and broken crockery also have been cited in pica cases.



Although consumption of some items may be harmless, pica is considered to be a serious eating disorder, sometimes resulting in serious health problems such as lead poisoning and iron-deficiency anemia.

Pica is Usually Found in...

- ✍ Pregnant women
- ✍ People whose diets are deficient in minerals contained in the consumed substances
- ✍ People who have psychiatric disturbances such as hysteria
- ✍ People with developmental disabilities or similar impairments
- ✍ People whose family or ethnic include eating certain non-food substances



- ✍ People who diet, become hungry, and try to ease hunger and cravings with low-calorie. Non-food substances

Some Pica is Harmless

But if the craved substance is toxic or contaminated (intestinal infestations and parasites are particular concerns), or if it blocks the intestines, it can lead to medical emergency and death. Medical evaluation is essential.

Pica: Facts and Theories

- ✍ The person must regularly eat these craved substances for a month or more before a diagnosis is given.
- ✍ The name “pica” comes from the Latin word *magpie*, a bird that is famous for eating anything and everything.
- ✍ Perhaps ten or twenty percent of children have pica at some time before adulthood.
- ✍ Depending on the population, zero percent to sixty-eight percent of pregnant women have pica. Those in lower socioeconomic groups seem to have more of these cravings.
- ✍ In some cases, pica is related not to dietary deficiencies but to folk traditions passed on in families or ethnic groups.
- ✍ Some people treat clay or dirt eating as a part of daily routine, somewhat like smoking.
- ✍ Others believe that eating dirt will help them incorporate magical spirits from the Earth into their bodies.
- ✍ Still others believe that certain kinds of clay will suppress morning sickness when eaten.
- ✍ Some children with pica may be imitating a pet dog or cat.



- ✍ Stress may be a precipitating factor, especially the stress of dieting when the person tries to relieve hunger and cravings with non-food substances.

- ✍ There is evidence to support the hypothesis that at least some pica is a response to dietary deficiency. Pregnant women, for example, have given up pica after they were treated for iron-deficiency anemia.
- ✍ But other cases of pica can cause dietary deficiencies because the consumed substances block absorption of essential nutrients in the intestines.
- ✍ If pica is a lifestyle choice that does not harm the individual, and if it is not part of an underlying eating disorder, it can go untreated, but care should be taken to protect against toxic substances (such as lead in paint and plaster chips). The person must be alert for symptoms (pain, lack of bowel movements, abdominal bloat and distention) that suggest the substance has formed an indigestible mass that has blocked the intestines. If such is the case, immediate medical attention is necessary.

Pica Symptoms

- ✍ Persistent eating of nonnutritive substances for a period of at least 1 month.
- ✍ The eating of nonnutritive substances is inappropriate to the developmental level.
- ✍ The eating behavior is not part of a culturally sanctioned practice.
- ✍ If the eating behavior occurs exclusively during the course of another mental disorder (e.g., Mental Retardation, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Schizophrenia), it is sufficiently severe to warrant independent clinical attention.

Criteria summarized from:

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fourth edition. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Causes and Risks

Pica is seen more in young children than adults, with 10 to 32% of children age one to six years old exhibiting these behaviors.



Pica can occur during pregnancy. In some cases, specific nutritional deficiencies, such as iron deficiency anemia and zinc deficiency, may trigger the unusual cravings. Pica may also occur in adults who crave a certain texture in their food.

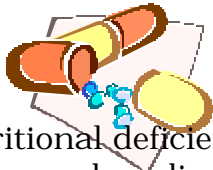
Prevention

There is no specific prevention. Adequate nutrition may be helpful.

Signs and Tests

There is no single test that confirms pica. However, since pica is associated with abnormal nutrient levels, and in some cases malnutrition, several tests may be performed. Serum levels of iron and zinc should be taken.

Treatment



Identified nutritional deficiencies and other problems, such as lead toxicity, should be addressed medically. Treatment emphasizes psychosocial, environmental, and family guidance approaches. Other successful treatments have been mild aversion therapy followed by positive reinforcement.

This involves associating bad consequences with eating non-food items and good consequences with normal behavior. Medications may be helpful in reducing the abnormal eating behavior, if pica occurs in the course of a developmental disorder, such as mental retardation, or pervasive developmental disorder. These conditions may be associated with severe behavioral disturbances, including pica.

Prognosis

Treatment success varies. In many cases, the disorder lasts several months, then resolves spontaneously. In some cases, it may continue into adolescence or adulthood, particularly when associated with developmental disorders.

- ✍ Malnutrition
- ✍ Lead toxicity
- ✍ Infection
- ✍ Bezoar (a hardened mass of substance in the stomach)
- ✍ Intestinal obstruction