



FEEDING AND EATING DISORDERS

PICA

What it is:

Pica is an eating disorder in which the individual eats one or more non-nutritive non-food substances on a regular basis over a period of at least 1 month. The substances consumed may vary greatly depending on the individual's age, as well as the types of substances readily available to them. Typical substances ingested may include paper, hair, soil, chalk, paint, charcoal, clay or ice, to name a few. It is important to note that the term non-food is used because a diagnosis of pica does not apply to eating only diet products or foods that have very little nutritional value. Pica does also not typically display with an aversion to food in general.

The eating of the non-nutritive, non-food substance must be developmentally inappropriate, and an individual should preferably be older than 2 years before a diagnosis can be made. Culture and social practise should also be taken into account. The eating of non-nutritive, non-food substances can also be associated with other mental disorders, such as intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder and schizophrenia. If the eating behaviour occurs exclusively in the context of another mental disorder, a diagnosis of pica should only be made if the eating behaviour is serious enough to warrant medical attention. Pregnant women who crave and eat non-nutritive substances such as ice or chalk should only be diagnosed with pica if the ingestion of these substances is believed to be harmful to the unborn child.

Common symptoms:

1. The regular or persistent eating of non-nutritive and non-food substances over a period of at least 1 month. Items ingested can include paper, soap, cloth, hair, soil, talcum powder, paint, metal, pebbles, starch or ice.
2. The eating of these substances is inappropriate given the developmental level and age of the individual.
3. The eating of these substances is not part of cultural or societal accepted norms or practises.



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Causes:

Pica is often associated with other mental disorders, such as intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder or schizophrenia. When there are no other mental health conditions present, neglect, lack of supervision and developmental delay can all increase an individual's risk for developing the disorder. In some cases deficiencies in vitamins or minerals have been reported, although this is not always present. Pica is also sometimes associated with trichotillomania (hair pulling disorder), and excoriation (skin picking disorder), as the hair or skin may be ingested.

Remember to always consult a mental health or medical practitioner regarding any questions you may have about a mental health diagnosis and treatment options.

This factsheet is based on information obtained from the DSM-5:
American Psychiatric Association, 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.*