

Managing Pica



A guide for parents and carers of a young person with a Learning Disability

What is Pica?

Pica is the eating of non-food items for a period of at least 1 month. Pica can be present in between 5% and 15% of children with Learning Difficulties and is managed with appropriate risk management and positive behavioural strategies. Whilst there is limited research, anecdotal feedback suggest that this may be a developmental state that over time may reduce.

What causes Pica?

As yet, from research we don't know why people engage in pica, and the reason is likely to be different for each young person, so it will require an individual assessment.

Some possible reasons include:

- Lack of awareness of what is, and is not, a food
- For sensory feedback
- To relieve anxiety or distress
- To get more time or contact with a trusted person
- To obtain or escape something
- Nutritional deficiencies

Common Pica items

- Clay, Dirt, Rock salt
- Clothing or thread
- Coins
- Faeces, Hair
- Paint chips, Plaster
- Paper
- Plants or grass
- Rocks or wood chips
- Shampoo
- Toys, Rubber bands

Some initial steps you can take

1. **Create a pica-safe environment:** Keep non-food items your child frequently attempts to eat out of his or her sight. Ensure your child is appropriately supervised.
2. **Inform all professionals working with your child of your child's pica.** Discuss a health check with medical professionals if you are concerned about risk to your child's health.
3. **Keep a list** of the items your child eats or mouths, times when your child tends to eat them, and situations or places where pica occurs. Share this information with involved professionals in order to reduce the risks.
4. **Familiarise yourself with risk of ingesting certain preferred pica items.** E.g., if your child tends to eat leaves, be aware of which items are poisonous or may cause a significant obstruction.

Strategies to manage or reduce Pica

The focus should be on shaping and offering alternative behaviours, rewarding positive behaviour, creating an enriched environment, meeting the young person's needs, and teaching new skills. Do not use punishment. Working together with professionals, you may use various strategies depending on the individual causes of the Pica for your child:

- **Creating an enriched environment:** access to a variety of food textures and tastes, stimulating environments and activities in order to offer distraction and stimulation.
- **Promoting self-soothing behaviour:** teaching and reinforcing body squeezes, listening to music, breathing exercises. (See our leaflet about teaching self-soothing behaviours)
- **Snack scheduling:** Make a snack available on a set schedule (every 30 minutes or hour). Tell your child that he/she can have a snack but don't try to make him/her eat it.
- **Rewarding positive behaviour:** if they are engaging in play or an activity with no Pica behaviour, really notice this by saying 'nice playing' or offer another interesting or rewarding activity (this might vary from person to person).
- **Teaching a "discard response",** so the person learns to throw the pica item away instead. To do this, it can be helpful to have a small bin for the young person to bring across different contexts like home, outdoors, and school. You can provide a reward for each discarded pica item. This also helps a child learn to tell the difference between food and non-food items.
- **Replacing pica items with similar, safe alternatives.** E.g., providing access to salad leaves in the garden, or digestible paper muffin wrappers. This allows you to more safely manage the Pica behaviour.

Managing risk

The number one priority in the management of pica is to keep the person safe and remove hazardous items, and parents should be aware of the potential severity of the condition. This includes monitoring for:

- Dangerous pica items which may cause an immediate risk of serious harm or death such as choking, poisoning or gut perforation.
- Items that may cause long-term and chronic ill health, such as infections and blockages in the digestive system. Be aware that batteries, sharp objects, cloth, and gloves/bags/plastic items are considered high risk.
- Seek medical advice and discuss physical health risk with Paediatrician or GP.

Further resources

<https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/007-Pica-and-Polydipsia.pdf>