



# Pica Awareness

## What is Pica?

Pica is the eating of non-nutritive items, i.e., non-foods. Examples include dirt, cloth, paper, plastic, metal, stones, hair and paint. Pica is reported in many different groups but is more frequent in people with a learning or intellectual disability and/or who are autistic. The causes of pica are not yet fully understood. We do know is that it can be compulsive, difficult to prevent and even one episode can be life-threatening.

**Most pica is harmless. However ingesting toxic, sharp objects or batteries, and in severe cases of pica, the risk of choking on ordinary objects such as paper or food could lead to serious injury or death**

## Help, Support and Useful Resources

- [National Autistic Society - Understanding & Managing Pica](#)
- [Challenging Behaviour Foundation - pica](#)
- Occupational Therapy for sensory support and assessment can be beneficial

## Health risks associated with Pica

Significant health risks are associated with pica including:

- Poisoning
- Parasitic infection
- Dental health issues
- Intestinal obstruction
- Choking
- Gut and bowel perforation

## Strategies for Professionals

- Agencies should work together to manage risk and share information.
- Ensuring individuals have regular health checks, scans and blood tests
- Keeping a diary to monitor what items are ingested / in faeces
- Include clear information and risks associated with pica in medical records, care plans and education health and care plans (EHCP).
- Seek additional training, support and resources on pica
- When someone is known to have pica, parents, carers and professionals should be made aware of the need to keep dangerous items out of reach.

## Possible Contributing Factors

Mouthing is normal in infancy, and may be appropriate for the developmental stage of the individual. For some individuals, the cause of pica is unknown. Possible contributing factors include: a lack of awareness of what are foods/non-foods, to relieve anxiety or distress, to gain attention or avoid a demand, for sensory feedback i.e., the taste or texture of items and/or nutritional deficiency (particularly iron). Hormonal factors (eg pregnancy, adolescence) may also contribute.

## Pica and Autism

Autistic people of all ages are at greater risk of engaging in pica. Sensory differences are likely to be a major contributing factor. Pica appears to increase when individuals are anxious and/or dysregulated, so pica may be a self-soothing behaviour. Good practice strategies include: risk assessment and monitoring what is eaten, ensuring individuals have regular health checks, distraction into meaningful activities (including sensory toys) and providing safe alternative items to eat or chew (such as purpose-made silicone chew bricks).

## Who Can 'Diagnose' Pica?

Currently, there are no national guidelines on managing pica. If you are worried about pica, as for any health concern, the usual first step for the individual to is to see their GP. If they are already known to a health professionals such as a paediatricians, gastroenterologists, psychiatrists and/ or clinical psychologists, they may also identify pica. Pica assessment should include risks, potential factors that can trigger a pica episode and the identification of strategies and interventions.

## Minute briefing