

Eating Things That Are Not Food

Also called Pica

Eating things that are not food is a recognized condition, not bad behavior, and there is a clear plan for treating it.

HOW COMMON

Up to 1 in 4 with a disability

OFTEN STARTS

Ages 2 to 3; also in pregnancy

TREATABLE

Yes - often fully

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Seen all over the world

What this is

- Pica means regularly eating things that are not food, such as soil, chalk, paper, ice, hair, paint chips, or soap.
- It is not naughtiness, defiance, or a sign of bad parenting. It is a recognized condition with causes we can look for.
- Babies and toddlers put everything in their mouths, and that is normal. Pica is only diagnosed from about age 2.
- In some communities eating clay or earth is an ordinary practice. That is culture, not pica, and it is not diagnosed.

What it can look and feel like

- The same non-food things get eaten again and again for a month or more, not just once out of curiosity.
- You find bite marks, missing chunks, or torn wrappers on things nobody should be eating, like soap or crayons.
- Crunching ice all day long is a very common form of pica, and it often means that iron is running low.
- It happens most during quiet, unwatched stretches of the day, such as long car rides or empty afternoons.
- Hair pulling and hair swallowing can go together, and swallowed hair slowly builds into a lump in the stomach.
- There may be no visible sign at all until stomach pain, constipation, vomiting, or a blood test brings it to light.
- In pregnancy, cravings for ice, clay, or laundry starch are common, and most people never mention them unless asked.

What is happening in your brain and body

- Low **iron** and low **zinc** are the findings that turn up most often, and treating them can stop ice craving quickly.
- The craving can start before the blood count drops, so eating ice may be the earliest sign that iron is running low.
- Eating clay or soil can lock up the iron and zinc in food, so the shortage deepens and the craving gets stronger.
- For many people with a disability, this is about how something feels in the mouth, not about hunger or attention.
- Paint chips and old house dust can carry **lead**, and low iron makes the body take lead up faster than it otherwise would.

What can make it more likely

- Low iron or zinc, from diet, heavy periods, or pregnancy, is the most fixable cause and is worth checking first.
- It is more common in intellectual disability and in autism, where the mouth is a main way of exploring the world.
- Long empty stretches, not enough food in the house, and thin supervision all raise how often the eating happens.
- Stress, grief, and anxiety play a part for some adults, where the eating becomes a way to soothe or settle yourself.

What to expect

- In children without a disability it usually fades over months as they grow, especially once low iron is corrected.
- When it comes with a lifelong disability, expect it to be managed rather than cured, and it can be managed very well.
- Correcting low iron can stop ice eating faster than the blood counts recover, sometimes within a couple of weeks.
- A good behavior plan brings the number of episodes down steadily. Progress is counted week by week, not overnight.

What helps Treatment works. Most people get better.

Talking therapies

- **Applied behavior analysis** is the main treatment. It starts by working out what the eating is doing for the person.
- The team then rewards a safe alternative - a chewy toy, a crunchy snack, a job to do - so there is a better option.
- Sorting practice teaches the difference between food and not-food, with praise each time the right choice is made.
- **Habit reversal** suits adults who can talk it through, and it fits well when hair pulling and eating go together.
- Any plan that involves physically guiding someone must be written down, agreed with you, and reviewed by a supervisor.

Medicines

- There is no medicine for pica itself. Replacing a missing mineral is the closest thing to a cure that exists.
- **Iron** is given as tablets, or through a drip when the gut cannot take it up, with a blood recheck a few weeks later.
- **Zinc** is added when a test shows it is low, and worm treatment is given if soil eating has caused an infection.
- A high lead level is treated with a medicine that pulls lead out of the body, along with removing the lead source.
- **SSRIs** or a low dose of an **antipsychotic** are used only for a separate condition, at a dose set with your prescriber.

Everyday things that help

- Safety comes first: put away cleaning products, small objects, and anything that has been eaten before.
- If your home was built before **1978**, have it checked for lead paint, and have it sealed or repaired, never sanded.
- Fill the quiet hours. Most episodes happen when nothing is going on, so structure helps more than watching alone.
- Offer safe crunchy or chewy alternatives through the day, so the mouth gets what it wants from something harmless.
- Book a dental check, and keep a short diary of what was eaten and when. Both of those guide the next step.

Get help right away if

- Belly pain, swelling, vomiting, or no bowel movement for days can mean a blockage. Go to the emergency room.
- Go in today if a battery, a magnet, or something sharp may have been swallowed. Those cannot wait.
- If you feel hopeless or think about ending your life, call or text **988**, or go to the nearest emergency room.

Questions to ask your care team

- *Can we check iron, ferritin, zinc, and a blood lead level right away?*
- *Who can build the behavior plan, and how often will we review it together?*
- *Should our home be tested for lead paint, and who does that testing?*
- *What warning signs mean I should go straight to the emergency room?*

Where this information comes from

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NOTE

Sources are listed in APA 7th edition style. This handout is general health information, not medical advice, and it does not replace talking with your own doctor, therapist, or prescriber. Medicine choices and doses are decided with your prescriber. If you are in danger or thinking about hurting yourself, call or text 988 in the United States, or go to your nearest emergency room.