Pica

**What is Pica?**

* Pica is an eating disorder in which a person eats non-food items.
* The child needs to have been persistent eating non-food items, over a period of at least one month.
* Commonly consumed items- soap, hair, paint, glue, feces, earth, soil, sand, clay, ashes, chalk, wood, rice and flour.

**Types of Pica**

* Pica has different subgroups, defined by the substance that is consumed, these are:
* Geophagia- eating earth, soil, sand, clay, ashes and chalk
* Pagophagia- ice
* Amylophagia- raw starches such as rice and flour

**What causes Pica?**

* Malnourishment, especially iron-deficiency anemia.
* More common in people with mental health conditions
* More common in children than adults
* More common in people with developmental conditions, such as autism or intellectual disabilities.

**Effects**

* Parasitic infection- parasites that feed on another organism (body), this can lead to sepsis.
* Intestinal blockage- an item that is blocking your intestine which stops the digestion of food.
* Lead poisoning- lead in the body (often from paint), this can cause abdominal pain, constipation, headaches, irritability, memory problems, infertility, and tingling in the hands and feet.
* If untreated it can result in more serious illness.

**Treatments**

* Conventional medical treatment may be suitable in some situations, such as iron, vitamins etc.
* Make sure children are up to date with their vaccinations e.g., sepsis
* Fore more serious health threats, they may need blood tests or X-rays. These can check for possible lead, anemia, toxins in the blood, and find blockages in the intestines
* As this is an eating disorder, treatment with counseling, education, and nutritional management is often more successful and more appropriate than treatment with medication
* Pica behaviour tends to lessen with age, help via counselling and nutritional management will stop the likelihood of this reoccurring

**Who to talk to**

* Doctors are the only professionals who can diagnose pica. Book an appointment with your GP to discuss this.
* The person needs to be 18 months old or be functioning at this age to get a diagnosis.
* The person needs to have been persistent eating non-food items, over a period of at least one month.

**Short term strategies**

* Removing the substance from accessible areas.
* Supervise them.
* Provide safe alternatives to chew/bite and eat.
* Distract away from pica and increase engagement in other activities
* Tell others (school, family, GP, health professionals) about pica so that you can communicate and find patterns in the behaviour.
* Request support, for example from learning disability or mental health services.

**Useful websites and resources**

* Heird, William C. "Food Insecurity, Hunger and Undernutrition." In *Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics.*17th ed. Ed. by Richard E. Behrman, et al., Philadelphia: Saunders, 2003, 167-172.
* Walsh, B. Timothy. "Eating Disorders." In *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine.*15th ed. Ed. by Eugene Braunwald et al., New York, McGraw Hill, 2001, 486-90.
* "Children and Eating Disorders." *Vanderbilt University.*Available online at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/psychology/health_psychology/childrenandED.html>.
* "Eating Disorder: Pica." *eMedicine.*Available online at <http://www.emedicine.com/ped/topic1798.htm>.
* “Overview- Eating disorders” *NHS*. Available online at <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/>