Pica

Brief Informational Guide



Pica is the repetitive exploration of non-food items in the mouth. About 1 in 4 children attempt to put non-food items in their mouths and may swallow them. This can be a sensory behavior and also indicate low iron levels.

Overview

- Mouthing and swallowing non-food objects is common among babies and toddlers. Most children will outgrow this by 24 months of age. It is considered pica if the child continues mouthing non-food items past this age.

Common Non-Food Items



Coins



Paper



Rocks



Dirt



Crayons

Scan Me

Problems Associated With Pica

Most children with pica are healthy. However, mouthing non-food items can lead to certain health problems.
This includes:

1. Mouth or teeth injuries
2. High levels of lead
3. Damage to the stomach and small intestines
4. Nutrition problems
5. Diarrhea or constipation

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echoautism.org

What's Next?



Things You Can Do Now

1. Keep a list of items your child eats or mouths and how often this occurs.
2. Keep a list of places and situations your child puts things in his/her mouth. See if there is a pattern.
3. Keep non-food items out of your child's reach/sight.
4. Put locks on doors/cabinets that contain possible pica objects.
5. Enrich your child's environment with objects that do not fit in their mouth.
6. Try to redirect or distract when the pica behavior occurs.

Things You Can Do Over Time

1. **Blocking** - an adult puts their hand on the child's hand to "block" them from putting the object in their mouth as a gentle reminder.
2. **Snack Scheduling** - make a snack available on a schedule or in specific settings that are common triggers of pica.
3. **Skill Building** - teach your child how to identify food vs non-food items.
4. **Reward Schedule** - give a reward for not mouthing a non-food item.

Don't worry if you do not see progress immediately! These things need to be consistently done over long periods of time.

With Your Healthcare Team

1. Check your child's zinc levels.
2. Provide vitamins or supplements if advised to by your child's doctor.
3. Take your child to the dentist regularly
4. See a nutritionist if your child is on a special diet or picky.

Referrals

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NOTES:

If you have questions about pica, please talk to your healthcare clinician.