A Family Services Guide

What is Pica?

Understanding the eating of non-food items, and how to keep children safe

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

What is Pica?

The persistent eating of non-food items

Such as dirt, paper, paint, hair, or small objects, for a period of at least one month, in a way that goes beyond what is typical for a child's age or development.

Mouthing objects is a normal part of early infant development, but when it continues well beyond toddlerhood, or involves a real attempt to eat non-food items, it is recognised as pica. Because of the potential for injury or poisoning, pica is a safety priority as well as a behavioural one.

Pica and autism

More common among autistic children

Pica is not exclusive to autism, but it is significantly more common among autistic children than in the general child population and is particularly associated with autism alongside a co-occurring intellectual disability.

Reported research suggests pica behaviours affect around a quarter of children with autism and intellectual disability, and a smaller but still notable proportion of autistic children without an intellectual disability.

Why pica happens

Sensory exploration

Seeking particular tastes, textures, or oral sensory input.

Difficulty distinguishing food from non-food items

A continuation of typical mouthing behaviour

Beyond the usual developmental stage.

Nutritional factors

In some cases pica has been linked to deficiencies such as low iron or zinc.

Stress, anxiety, or self-regulation

Or a way of communicating an unmet need.

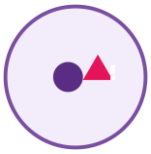
Reduced awareness of risk

Or consequence around eating unsafe items.

Pica is not the same as stimming

Oral stimming

E.g. chewing a safe chew toy or fidget item, is a self-soothing sensory behaviour using items designed to be chewed safely.



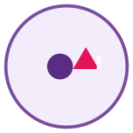
Pica

Involves the ingestion of genuinely non-food, often unsafe, items and carries a real risk of physical harm.

Why this distinction matters

Recognising this distinction matters because the response and level of urgency needed are very different.

Signs to look out for



Regularly putting non-food items in the mouth

Or swallowing them – e.g. dirt, paper, paint, hair, small toys, or household items.

Unexplained stomach pain, constipation

Or changes in appetite.

Unusual mouth sores, chipped teeth

Or dental problems.

Signs of illness

That could suggest infection, parasites, or poisoning.

Health and safety risks

Choking or blockages

In the digestive tract, particularly from larger, sharp, or indigestible items.

Poisoning

Especially from items such as paint, batteries, or cleaning products.

Infections

Including from parasites or bacteria in items such as dirt or animal faeces.

Dental damage or mouth injuries

From biting or swallowing hard or sharp non-food items.

When to seek urgent help

This is a genuine medical emergency in the situations below – do not wait to see if symptoms pass.

Seek urgent medical attention or call 999 immediately if:

- **Your child has swallowed a battery, magnet, sharp object, or anything toxic – this is a medical emergency.**
- **There are signs such as severe stomach pain, vomiting, difficulty swallowing or breathing, or suspected poisoning – these also need urgent medical assessment.**

How to support someone with pica

Prioritise safety first

Reduce access to known unsafe or commonly-targeted items in the child's environment.

Seek a medical assessment

A GP can check for underlying causes such as nutritional deficiency and assess any physical impact.

Offer safe sensory alternatives

Appropriate chew-safe items can meet a similar sensory need without the same risk.

Increase supervision in higher-risk environments

Such as outdoor spaces or areas with small objects.

Seek a behavioural assessment

From a professional (e.g. speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, or specialist behavioural support) to understand the individual function of the behaviour and build an individualised support plan.

Avoid punishment

Pica is not wilful misbehaviour, and punitive responses are not effective and can increase distress.

Remember

Pica can be frightening for families because of the safety risks involved, but it is a recognised and manageable behaviour with the right combination of medical assessment, environmental safety measures, and individualised behavioural support. Early assessment and a joined-up approach between home, school, and health professionals gives the best outcome.