



**Homerton Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# **Pica (eating non-food items)**

Advice for parents and carers supporting children and young people with pica

# What is pica?

Pica is a feeding disorder where a child or young person craves and eats non-food items. It can be diagnosed if the behaviour:

- 1) Lasts more than one month
- 2) Is developmentally inappropriate
- 3) Is not part of a cultural practice

Children under 2 often mouth or swallow objects as part of normal development, so pica is rarely diagnosed before this age.

Children with pica may eat include **chalk, ice, sand, soil, glue, plaster, playdough, toothpaste, soap, clothing, fluff, faeces, wires, paper and pencils.**

The exact cause of pica is unclear, there is no single cause - multiple factors may contribute:

## Developmental and mental health factors

Pica is more common in children with developmental delays, autism, learning difficulties, ADHD, and other conditions such as OCD. Mouthing objects may offer comfort

## Sensory and environmental

Some children enjoy the texture, smell, feel or taste of non-food items. Pica may help reduce anxiety or stress in certain environments

## Behaviour as communication

Children may use pica to express needs, discomfort, or emotions when they struggle to communicate verbally. It can be a way to gain attention or escape demands

## Nutritional deficiencies

Low iron or zinc levels may trigger cravings for non-food items

## What can you do to help?

Keep a record - jot down what items your child chews or eats each day and share it with any professionals involved in their care. Note how often your child puts non-food items in their mouth.

Track the pica behaviour- Note how often your child puts non-food items in their mouth. It can also help professionals if you describe what happens next to your child (e.g. they appear calmed) and how you respond.

Spot patterns - Record where and when the behaviour happens—certain places or times might trigger it. It can also be helpful to think of possible reasons why (purpose) they do this (e.g. sensory stimulation, attention).

Secure cupboards and draws, vacuum and tidy regularly

Offer fun alternatives - Make sure your child has access to toys and activities they enjoy that don't involve mouthing objects.

Teach what is safe. If your child's development allows, help them learn which items are food and which are not safe to eat.

# Strategies to support your child

**It can be very stressful and worrying for families to manage pica. It is important to know that punishing your child for the behaviour is not effective as it is a feeding disorder and is not within their control**

## Understanding sensory needs

Some children chew or eat objects to meet sensory needs (finding pleasure and comfort).

Provide **chewable items**: Consider providing chew toys, chewing gum (for older children/teenagers), or chewy necklaces to satisfy the urge to chew.

## Create a safe environment

Remove or secure any objects that your child may be tempted to eat

Place **safe textured toys**, fidget objects, or soft materials within easy access.

Monitor and engage: Stay involved in your child's activities and supervise them when needed, especially in unstructured environments.

## Reframe Responses to Pica

**Avoid strong reactions** like shouting or showing distress, which may unintentionally reinforce the behaviour.

Use a **calm, neutral tone** when intervening—brief instructions like “Put that down, thanks” work better.

Redirect attention to a safe activity or item immediately after intervening.

Reframe “no” into positive instructions: Instead of “Don't eat that,” say “Let's chew this instead.”

## Reinforce positive behaviour

Catch them being good—praise moments when your child is not engaging in pica or is using safe alternatives.

Use **specific praise**: “I love how you're chewing your toy instead of putting things in your mouth.”

## Establish a routine

Consistency is key: A **predictable daily routine** can help reduce anxiety and impulsive behaviours, including pica. Use visual schedules or reminders to guide your child through the day.



# Messy play ideas

If your child enjoys messy play, here are some food-safe options perfect for children who engage in pica behaviours. These are low risk if accidentally ingested.

## 1. Edible Play Dough

Materials: Salt dough, cornstarch dough, marshmallow dough

Tips: Supervise during play, Limit access, Set clear boundaries

## 2. Foam Play

Materials: Non-toxic shaving cream, whipped cream

Tips: Use small amounts, Monitor closely, Check for allergies

## 3. Rice & Pasta Play

Materials: Cooked rice or pasta

Tips: Keep portions moderate, clean up after play, offer alternatives if high ingestion is a concern

## 4. Jelly Play

Materials: Plain gelatine, agar jelly

Tips: Use limited amounts, supervise to prevent overconsumption, replace with other textures if needed

## 5. Tapioca & Yogurt Play

Materials: Tapioca pearls, yogurt

Tips: Provide in small portions, supervise closely, avoid waste and excessive intake

## 6. Water Play with Edibles

Materials: Fruit pieces, soft herbs or vegetables

Tips: Use safe, non-choking items, set clear boundaries, monitor at all times.

# Who should I contact for support?



Follow up with your GP if you notice - ongoing stomach pain, blood in the poo, constipation or diarrhoea, mouth injuries

## Talk to your GP

Your child's GP can arrange blood tests to check for nutrient deficiencies like iron, zinc, and even lead poisoning (especially if your child eats soil or paint).

If a deficiency is found, your child may need to take a prescribed supplement. They should complete the full 3–6-month course. Repeat testing will often be needed to check if levels return to normal.

Regular visits to the dentist are important—chewing unusual things can harm teeth over time.

## Does Pica Go Away with Treatment?

Pica often improves when deficiencies are corrected—but not always. If other causes are involved (e.g. sensory or behavioural), extra support might be needed.

**If your child may have swallowed a sharp or dangerous item, go straight to A&E or call 999.**

# When is further support needed?

If eating non-food items continues and home strategies haven't worked, talk to your GP or health visitor. They may be able to refer your child to the Hackney Ark team for more specialist support.

## Seeing a Dietitian

- If your child has low levels of important nutrients, they might be referred to a dietitian. They don't treat pica directly but can help with meal ideas and nutrition tips.

## Other People Who May Get Involved

- A Paediatrician might complete a developmental assessment or health review if your child's GP has specific concerns.
- CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) could offer guidance around understanding and supporting your child's behaviours and feelings
- An Occupational Therapist might invite you to a sensory workshop to better understand your child's needs.

## Team Approach

- Professionals will work together to support your child's development and wellbeing.



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