



## Pica

*BQIS Fact Sheets provide a general overview on topics important to supporting an individual's health and safety and to improving their quality of life. This document provides general information on the topic and is not intended to replace team assessment, decision-making, or medical advice.*

### Intended Outcomes

Individuals will understand the definition of pica, be aware of complications of pica, and be aware of available treatment options.

### Definitions

**Pica:** The ongoing eating or swallowing of non-nutritious substances for at least one (1) month at an age when it would be developmentally inappropriate.

### Facts

- Most frequently observed in children but also reported to be displayed by individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD).
- The more severe the intellectual disability, the more likely the individual is to exhibit pica. Pica occurs most often between the ages of ten to twenty years in individuals with IDD.
- Pica frequently involves eating or swallowing substances such as clay, dirt, sand, stones, hair, feces, lead, vinyl gloves, plastic, pencil erasers, cigarette butts, paper, paint chips, wood, light bulbs, needles, string and wires.
- Complications:
  - Can be life threatening.
  - Can cause constipation, ulcerations in the gut, intestinal obstruction or perforation.
  - Can also cause tooth abrasion.
  - Ingestion of lead is the most frequent type of poisoning associated with pica.
  - Ingestion of feces or dirt can be associated with parasitic infections.
- Treatment:
  - In children, pica may stop spontaneously.
  - A team approach is often helpful (e.g., physician, psychologist, dentist, social worker).
  - Treatment involves the behaviors, the environment, and family or caregiver education.



- Imaging tests such as an abdominal radiography, upper and lower gastrointestinal barium examinations, or upper gastrointestinal endoscopy may be used to identify items that have been eaten.
- Treatment should include an investigation of any lack of nutrients in the diet.
- Medications used for management of severe behavioral problems may also improve pica.

### **Recommended Actions and Prevention Strategies**

1. Manage any lack of nutrients in the diet as per physician/dietitian orders.
2. Watch for incidents of pica.
3. Look out for any non-nutritious items that the individual is known to eat or swallow and remove from their environment.
4. Avoid areas that have preferred pica items that cannot be removed.
5. If pica occurs, watch out for complications related to ingestion of the item such as toxicity, bowel problems, dental problems, etc.
6. Contact a supervisor, nurse, and/or physician if there are concerns.
7. Write down and report any incidents, symptoms, and the frequency of symptoms to your supervisor and other team and family members.



### Learning Assessment

The following questions can be used to verify a person's competency regarding the material contained in this Fact Sheet:

1. Pica is most frequently observed in:
  - A. Children
  - B. Adults with depression
  - C. Individuals with IDD
  - D. Adolescents
2. Complications of pica consist of:
  - A. Constipation
  - B. Seizures
  - C. Mania
  - D. Sedation
3. Treatment consists of:
  - A. Assessment of possible lack of nutrients in the diet
  - B. Tylenol
  - C. Starvation
  - D. Motrin
4. Ingestion of soil can cause:
  - A. Parasitic infection
  - B. Obesity
  - C. Bad breath
  - D. Clean teeth



## References

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Hagopian, L. P., Rooker, G. W. & Rolider, N. U. (2011). Identifying empirically supported treatment for pica in individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 32 (6), 2114-2020. Retrieved 08/01/2015 from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21862281>.

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## Learning Assessment Answers

1. A
2. A
3. A
4. A