

PICA

What is pica?

Pica is an eating disorder that involves the eating of nonfood substances. Some examples are: dirt, paper, paper clips, latex gloves, plaster, plastic, pencils, string, and cigarette butts. People have been known to ingest items that most of us couldn't even imagine being able to swallow like light bulbs, bed springs, needles, face cloths, etc. No one really knows what causes it but it is most common in young children and individuals with developmental disabilities. It may be an indication, in some circumstances, of a nutritional deficiency like iron.

What are the risks of pica?

Pica can place the individual at great health risk even death. It can lead to:

- Poisoning
- Infections and parasitic diseases
- Severe problems with their gastrointestinal tract (esophagus, stomach and bowels) like tearing holes in the esophagus, stomach or bowel, obstruction (blockage) of the bowel or ulcers.

What should I do if I work with someone with pica?

- Make sure there is a specific protocol in place to manage that individual's pica which should include things like level of supervision, securing items, that might be ingested, what to do when you are aware or suspect that the person has eaten a nonfood item, etc.
- Make sure all staff are aware of the protocol
- Provide training to all staff in the protocol
- Review the protocol at regular intervals to make sure it is working.

What should I do if I know or suspect that someone has ingested a nonfood item?

- Follow your protocol
- Contact your agency nurse or the Health Care Provider (HCP)
- Do not hesitate to take someone to the ER or insist on an office visit if you feel the individual is not improving after following the protocol or the instructions of the agency nurse/HCP.