

Pica and Sickle Cell Disease: What You Need to Know

Adopted from A Parent's Guide to PICA presented by Autism Speaks ATN/AIR-P



Common items children with pica mouth or eat:

Chalk
Cigarette butts
Clay
Clothing or thread
Coins
Dirt
Feces
Hair
Ice
Paint chips
Paper
Plants/grass
Plaster
Rocks, pebbles, wood chips
Rock salt
Rubber bands
Shampoo
Toys



What is Pica?

Pica is when your child is constantly eating things that are not edible. Some kids may just hold these things in their mouths, while others may swallow them quickly. Most kids do this when they are babies, however if the behavior continues past 18 months of age, a diagnosis of Pica would be warranted. While pica is more commonly seen in autism, there has been a noted number of cases in those with Sickle Cell Disease. We are unsure of why this happens, though it may be linked to an iron deficiency.

Warning Signs:

- Child puts items such as small toys in mouth
- They search for things to eat or put in their mouth
- Nonfood items are found in your child's poop
- The child eats food from the floor, trashcan, or other odd places
- They have trouble telling food from nonfood items
- People who spend a lot of time with the child are reporting concerns for pica (like teachers)



How pica can become a problem for your child:

When your child is eating things they shouldn't, they can cause blockages in the stomach. Certain items (e.g., glass, rubber bands) can damage the stomach and/or intestines. Additional concerns include:

- High lead levels in blood
- Nutrition problems
- Poisoning
- Infections in the mouth, stomach, and/or intestines
- Wearing down of teeth



What to do about Pica?

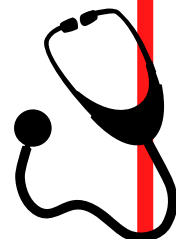
First, touch base with the following professionals:

Your HemOnc Team

- We will run specific labs to ensure there are no low levels of nutrients that could be causing this behavior and recommend supplements if needed; we will also test for lead to ensure your child is safe
- You will meet with the dietician to ensure your child has a well-balanced diet

Make sure to keep up with all **dental appointments**

Your child may be referred for **neuropsychological testing**



How to Address Pica in the Home



Keep track of the following: items your child eats or put in their mouths. Make sure to share this list with your child's doctors and caregivers (including teachers)

- Of the frequency of the behavior in a daily notebook
- Of the places and situations where your child puts things in their mouth

Keep the nonfood items your child often goes to eat out of sight and put them in a safe location (e.g., the basement)



Vacuum or sweep daily to reduce available items on the floor the child could eat



Put locks on cabinets, closets, or doors that contain possible pica objects



Teach danger awareness skills- have your child practice identifying things that are not edible or dangerous



Enrich their environment- during down times, make sure your child has access to things they like to do that does not include pica items



Other Techniques to Use in the Home

Blocking: putting your hand on top of the child's hand to prevent them from putting an item in their mouth

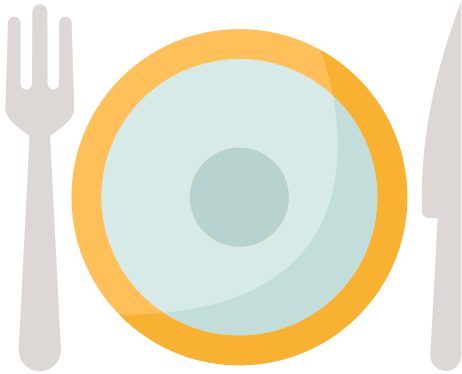
- o Use the least amount of force necessary to prevent the child from placing the item in their mouth
- o Try to block before your child gets the item near their mouth
- o You may see a negative response at first- such as aggression. We suggest consistency in your response so the child learns they cannot get out of your intervention



Skill-Building: Teaching your child how to tell food and nonfood items apart. To achieve this, you want to provide rewards and utilize pictures.

Here is an example:

- o Have your child sit at the table with a plate and a colored placemat
- o Put a few nonfood items on the table
- o Put your child's favorite food on your child's plate
- o Reward your child (praise + reward) for eating from the plate; simply remove the nonfood item with blocking if they try during this- do not punish, try not to give this a ton of attention



Snack scheduling: provide snacks every hour. Do not make them eat it, rather prompt them that it's available visually. More frequent snacks may provide your child with other options besides nonfood items



Habit Reversal Training: finding competing responses to the need

- o Increase awareness of behavior (why/when am I eating paper)
- o Find a competing response (eat a mint)
 - o Build motivation (is pica getting in the way of something)
- o Generalize these skills to other places (from home to school)



Reward schedule: Give frequent rewards throughout the week for when your child is avoiding eating nonfood items. Be sure to tie this to praise (“You’re getting a toy for staying away from kitty litter this week, I’m so proud of your for making healthy choices!”)