

# Pica & lead poisoning

Pica is the compulsive eating of material that may or may not be foodstuff. The material is often consumed in large quantities without regard for nutritional consequences.

## Who's at risk?

Most cases of pica occur in children and pregnant women. Pica cravings occur in approximately **25-30% of all children** and are even less common in pregnant women.



## What causes pica?

**It is unknown what causes pica cravings in pregnant women and children.** Putting objects into the mouth is a normal learning behavior in children, but can develop into pica. In some cases, it may be related to development, mental health, malnutrition, hunger, or stress.

According to the Journal of American Dietetic Association, there may be a connection to iron deficiencies during pregnancy. It may be the body's attempt to obtain certain vitamins and minerals missing from regular food consumption.



## Lead poisoning

**Eating certain substances, such as paint chips or dirt, that contain lead may cause lead poisoning.** Children younger than age 6 are at higher risk from the health effects of lead exposure because their brains and bodies are still developing and growing.

**Lead poisoning during pregnancy can have serious health effects on the fetus.** High levels can cause miscarriage, preterm birth, or injuries in the baby's kidneys and nervous system, causing the baby to have learning or behavior problems in the future.



## Diagnosis, treatment, & remediation

**There are no laboratory tests for pica.** Diagnoses are made from a clinical history of the patient. A pica diagnosis often involves tests for anemia, various intestinal disorders, or toxicities attained as a result of pica-related behaviors.

**A blood test is the best way to know if you've been exposed to lead.** Based on the level of exposure, doctors will recommend you find and remove lead from your environment. Continual surveillance and follow-up blood lead testing is recommended.

**It is important to correct lead hazards in the home.** Create temporary barriers while permanent methods of remediation occur. Suggestions include: use contact paper or duct tape to cover chipped paint and holes, or move furniture in front of those types of surfaces.

