

Pica Prevention and Response

Professionally guided interventions can reduce risk and improve safety outcomes when paired with medical monitoring. Below are some common prevention and response strategies.



Medical-Related

- Test for iron, zinc, and micronutrient deficiencies.
- Do regular lead screenings, especially in high-risk environments.
- Address GI symptoms (vomiting, diarrhea, constipation) that may co-occur with pica and autism.
- Monitor dental health regularly.

Environmental & Supervision

- Track and document pica.
- Provide list of pica items to babysitters, teachers, etc.
- Keep non-food items out of reach.
- Use secured storage and locks for high-risk objects.
- Sweep/vacuum and scan for items frequently.

Behavioral Interventions

- Use functional assessment to identify triggers and functions of pica.
- Provide safe oral/sensory alternatives (chewables, foods with safe textures.)
- Provide reinforcement for appropriate oral behavior.
- Create structured snack schedules and sensory supports.
- Practice safe replacement behaviors (“If I want to chew, I use this.”)
- Teach safety skills of how to identify unsafe, non-food items.
- For nonspeaking individuals, provide functional communication training to help with communication of needs.

How to Respond When Pica Is Happening

- Stay calm and neutral (big reactions can unintentionally reinforce behavior.)
- If an item is in the mouth, prompt removal calmly.
- Respond thoughtfully: strong reactions, consequence, or extra attention can sometimes make pica happen more often once attention is removed.
- If swallowed, assess risk and contact poison control, a medical provider, or emergency services as appropriate.

Follow up

- Share concerns with healthcare providers, therapists, or school teams.
- Adjust prevention strategies based on what you observe.
- Even when successfully treated, pica may reemerge as individuals' needs change or as prior support and treatment strategies are no longer properly implemented.
- If pica starts to happen more often, or shifts towards more hazardous items, seek professional support immediately.

When to Seek Immediate Help



Call 911 if:

- Items like toxic substances, sharp objects, batteries, or magnets have been ingested
- There are signs of choking, severe pain, vomiting, blood, or bowel obstruction

**For Poison Control, call
1-800-222-1222**

