



Understanding Autism and Pica

What Is Pica?

Pica is the repeated eating of non-nutritive, non-food items ranging from mildly noxious to extremely poisonous and/or life-threatening (e.g., dirt, paper, plastic, rocks, batteries, cigarette butts, sharp objects, and bodily excretions.) Pica is more common in children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities than in the general population, and it can occur across childhood development. Even when successfully treated, pica can reemerge throughout an individual's lifetime in response to changing, and otherwise unmet individual needs.

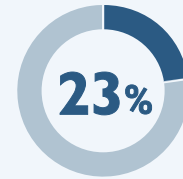
While mouthing objects is common in typical toddlers as part of exploration, pica is diagnosed when the behavior persists beyond infancy and is inappropriate for the child's developmental level (APA, 2022).

Prevalence of Pica

Large population-based research indicates that approximately 23% of preschool-aged children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibited pica, compared with about 3.5% of children in the general population. Prevalence was higher ($\approx 28\%$) among autistic children with co-occurring intellectual disability (ID) and lower ($\approx 14\%$) among those without ID (McAdam et al., 2014; Fields et al., 2021).

Other studies suggest that while pica is less common overall in childhood, it remains significantly associated with autism and other developmental delays (Matson et al., 2011). Some studies suggest prevalence may be higher in adults with autism.

How Common is Pica in ASD?



According to research, **23% of preschool-aged children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibited pica**, compared with about 3.5% of children in the general population.

References:

- American Psychiatric Association. (2022). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed., text rev.).
- Autism Research Institute. (n.d.). Pica and autism. Autism Research Institute.
- Fields, V. L., Soke, G. N., Reynolds, A., Tian, L. H., Wiggins, L. D., DiGuseppi, C., Alexander, A., Lee, L. C., Schieve, L. A., & Christensen, D. L. (2021). Pica, autism, and other disabilities. *Pediatrics*, 147(2), e20200462. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-0462>
- Matson, J. L., Hattier, M. A., & Belva, B. C. (2011). Treating adaptive living skills of persons with autism using applied behavior analysis: A review. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2010.06.008>
- McAdam, D. B., Sherman, J. A., Sheldon, J. B., & Napolitano, D. A. (2014). Behavioral interventions to reduce pica: A review of single-case design studies. *Behavior Modification*, 38(4), 594–619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445514531663>

