

## HEALTH & SAFETY: PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

### “Pica”

*BQIS/Outreach Fact Sheets provide a general overview on topics important to supporting an individual's health and safety and to improving their quality of life.*

#### Objectives

Individuals will understand the definition of pica, be aware of complications of pica and be aware of available treatment options.

#### Definitions

**Pica:** The persistent ingestion of nonnutritive substances for at least one month at an age when it would be developmentally inappropriate.

#### Facts

- Most frequently observed in children but commonly reported to be displayed by many intellectually delayed/disabled individuals.
- The more severe the intellectual disability the more likely the individual is to exhibit pica. Pica occurs most often between the ages of 10-20 years in persons with intellectual disabilities.
- Frequently ingested substances consist of clay, dirt, sand, stones, hair, feces, lead, vinyl gloves, plastic, pencil erasers, cigarette butts, paper, paint chips, wood, light bulbs, needles, string and wires.
- Complications:
  - Can be life threatening
  - Ingestion of lead is the most frequent type of poisoning associated with pica
  - Ingestion of feces or dirt can be associated with parasitic infections
  - Can cause constipation, ulcerations in the gut, intestinal obstructions or even a perforation
  - Can also cause tooth abrasion

- Treatment:
  - In children, pica may stop spontaneously
  - Team approach is often helpful (Psychologist, Dentist, Social Worker)
  - No specific medical treatment
  - Assess possible nutritional deficits
  - Medications used for management of severe behavioral problems may improve pica

## Recommended Actions and Prevention Strategies

1. Manage any nutritional deficits per physician/dietitian orders.
2. Observe for incidents of pica.
3. Monitor and remove from environment any nonnutritive items that the person is known to ingest.
4. Avoid areas that have preferred PICA items that cannot be removed.
5. If PICA occurs monitor for complications related to ingestion of the item such as toxicity, bowel complications, dental complications, etc.
6. Notify supervisor, nurse and/or physician as appropriate.
7. Document and report incidents, symptoms and frequency of symptoms to your supervisor and other team and family members.

## Learning Assessment

Questions that can be used to verify a person's competency in the material contained in this Fact Sheet:

1. Pica is most commonly exhibited by:
  - A. Young children
  - B. Adults with depression
  - C. Individuals with intellectual disabilities
  - D. Adolescents
2. Complications of pica consist of:
  - A. Constipation
  - B. Seizures
  - C. Mania
  - D. Sedation
3. Treatment consists of:
  - A. Assessment of possible nutritional deficits
  - B. Tylenol
  - C. Starvation
  - D. Motrin

4. Ingestion of soil can cause:
  - A. Parasitic infection
  - B. Obesity
  - C. Bad breath
  - D. Clean teeth

## References

eMedicine - Eating Disorder, Pica [emedicine.medscape.com/article/914765-overview](http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/914765-overview)

## Related Resources

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [www.aacap.org/cs/forFamilies](http://www.aacap.org/cs/forFamilies)

MedlinePlus - Pica [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001538.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001538.htm)

## Learning Assessment Answers

1. A
2. A
3. A
4. A

## Outreach Services

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As a service for persons supporting individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities, BQIS/ Outreach developed the Outreach Fact Sheet Library. The information provided is designed to enhance the understanding of the topic and does not replace other professional or medical instructions or individually developed plans. For more fact sheets and information, please visit [DDRSOutreach.IN.gov](http://DDRSOutreach.IN.gov).



**Indiana Family & Social Services Administration**  
**Division of Disability & Rehabilitative Services**  
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