



Trafford Safeguarding
Adults Board

TSAB SAFEGUARDING ADULTS BOARD UNDERSTANDING PICA



MINUTE
BRIEFING

1. What is PICA?

Pica refers to eating objects that are inedible such as stones, coins, shampoo and clothing. Children and adults may eat one specific inedible object, or lots of different ones. Research into the causes, assessment and strategies for pica is very limited. This information sheet is based on the available research and current clinical practice.

2 What are the risks?

Whilst some objects pass through the body without harm, PICA can pose significant health risks and can potentially be life threatening depending on the substances being ingested. Some of the common risks include:

- Poisoning or Toxicity
- Choking or Intestinal Blockages
- Infections
- Nutritional Deficiencies

3. What causes PICA?

The specific causes of pica are not clear, but some conditions can increase the chance that a child or adult will develop pica. These are:

- learning disabilities
- autism
- diet lacking in iron or zinc
- pregnancy

It is estimated that up to a quarter of children and adults with a learning disability display pica behaviour. The more severe a child or adult's learning disability, the greater the chance that they will display pica behaviour.

3. What causes PICA?

[continued]

The causes of PICA can vary and there is no single factor that triggers the behaviour.

Some potential causes include:

1. **Nutritional Deficiencies:** Some individuals with PICA have been found to have deficiencies in minerals like iron or zinc. The consumption of non-food items may be the body's way of compensating for these deficiencies.
2. **Developmental Delays:** PICA is more common in individuals with developmental disabilities or autism, possibly due to sensory-seeking behaviours or difficulties with impulse control.
3. **Sensory Needs:** Many individuals with PICA are drawn to the texture or sensory stimulation that comes from eating non-food items. For example; the crunch of dirt or the feel of plastic.
4. **Psychological Factors:** PICA can sometimes be linked to an underlying mental health conditions and be used as a coping mechanism or provide temporary relief from emotional distress.

4. How do you assess PICA?

To try to determine the causes of pica, professionals (including clinical psychologists and behavioural nurse specialists) generally use a functional assessment. This usually involves the professional interviewing the child or adult's main carer. They also include recording charts which are used to establish why an individual is eating inedible objects.

Together, this information is used to form a behavioural support plan, aimed at reducing or eliminating pica behaviour.



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5. Interventions for PICA?

As with other challenging behaviours, understanding the function of PICA is essential in developing an effective intervention plan. Behavioural interventions often focus on identifying the cause of the behaviour and teaching replacement behaviours that serve the same function but in a safer, more appropriate way.

Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA): The first step is conducting a Functional Behaviour Assessment to determine the function of the behaviour. Is the individual engaging in PICA for sensory stimulation, attention, or escape? Understanding the motivation behind the behaviour helps guide the intervention plan.

Here are some evidence-based strategies used to address PICA:

1. **Environmental Modifications:** One of the key strategies in managing PICA is altering the environment to reduce access to non-food items. This might involve removing items like small objects, keeping unsafe materials out of reach, and supervising the individual closely in environments where PICA is likely to occur.
2. **Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviours:** A common approach is to reinforce appropriate behaviours, such as eating actual food or engaging with sensory toys instead of non-food items. This might involve using a system of positive reinforcement where the individual is rewarded for consuming only appropriate food items.
3. **Oral Sensory Stimulation:** For individuals with sensory needs, providing safe alternatives for oral stimulation can be an effective intervention. Chewable toys or oral-motor activities can meet the individual's need for sensory input without the risk of ingesting harmful substances.
4. **Task Modification and Structured Routine:** Some individuals engage in PICA as a way to escape from difficult tasks or situations. Modifying tasks to make them more manageable or establishing a structured routine can reduce anxiety and help the individual stay focused on safe, positive activities.
5. **Consistent Redirection and Extinction:** Redirection involves guiding the individual away from the non-food item and toward a safer alternative, such as a toy or preferred activity. Extinction is a strategy where the behaviour is no longer reinforced (e.g., by consistently preventing access to non-food items), leading to a reduction in the behaviour over time.

REMEMBER:

If you are worried about a child or adult who has eaten an inedible object it is vital that you contact their GP or your nearest accident and emergency department for medical advice.

To access more Learning and Development resources please visit www.traffordsafeguardingpartnership.org.uk