From Dr. Escudé…

Pica Behavior in People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Eating things that are non-food items for a month or longer is called a pica. Pica in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) can be an indication of other conditions not common to people without IDD. Some things that have been noted to cause pica include:

- Iron deficiency
- A mineral deficiency
- Chemical imbalance in the brain
- Attention-seeking behavior
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Maternal deprivation, poverty, neglect
- Chronic esophagitis
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (especially in people with IDD)

In any person with IDD and pica, GERD or other gastrointestinal conditions should be strongly considered! Eating non-food items may be an attempt to wash down the reflux and lessen the discomfort associated with GERD.

Some complications of pica include:

- Ingestion of toxic substances (lead)
- Infections or parasitic infestation (toxocariasis, ascariasis)
- Gastrointestinal problems (constipation, mechanical bowel obstruction, ulcerations, perforations)
- Dental manifestations (tooth abrasion, fracture, loss)
- Respiratory complications (aspiration of material during ingestion or regurgitation)
- Unexplained weight loss

Management often requires a multidisciplinary approach including psychologists, social workers, physicians and direct support staff. It can be very difficult to manage. Ruling out potentially treatable causes such as gastroesophageal reflux or iron deficiency is very important.
Thanks for your careful attention to helping the people we support to live healthy lives.

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Dr. Escudé has dedicated his career to providing healthcare for people with IDD and other vulnerable populations and teaches on the subject throughout the country.