People Who Eat Most Anything When People Fall for Pica

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"Why does my brother eat dirt?" My friend almost begged for an answer. And he continued, "It isn't just ordinary dirt, it has to be scraped from his car fender; you know, the dirt that is plastered to the underside of the mudguards." My friend's brother has PICA, a medical mystery.

Pica gets its name from that "tuxedoed" black and white bird, the Magpie. Bird watchers and Westerners know it well, and its unique practice of making off with curious objects in its inquisitive beak. That is, its peculiar eating behaviors.

Why do people eat clay and starch? Or hair and coal? Pica is defined as "a morbid craving to eat things not normally eaten." These tidbits include charcoal and wool. Where's the fun in wool eating? That's a part of the enigma. None of the stuff is tasty or nutritious. Indeed, some of the pica-choices are downright morbid. Take paint. Older paints contain lead. Kids like to gnaw on it whether it's the old chest of drawers in the back bedroom, or the rail on the front veranda. Result? Lead poisoning with all its morbidity; sickliness that includes non-reversible loss of intelligence. A brain-challenged kid grows up to become a brain challenged adult. All because of pica. Lead in blood, bone and brain is a downer.

Another substance for the gourmet pica aficionado is hair. Any problems with that? Intestinal obstruction for one. Hair is virtually indigestible and doesn't progress down the intestine like it was piece of carrot. Instead, it gathers in a ball, refusing to leave the stomach. Now it's become a tricobezoar. And at this juncture it's a nondigestable mass that can obstruct and lead to a session with the surgeon's knife.

Then consider pregnancy. Pickles and crackers have long been a favorite with mothers to be. But not so obvious is the obsession to dine on laundry starch; any starch for that matter. That's not so perilous of it self, but the anemia that may accompany it is. And the scurvy, Beri Beri or other vitamin deficiencies are a threat. Starch is calories, empty ones. And that's a nutritional downer for both mother and developing baby. Pica and pregnancy are inopportune bedfellows.

So what is the cause of this magpie behavior? Hard to say for certain, but some patients of pica declare that they enjoy the taste, the smell or the texture of their ashes or charcoal or whatever. What do they say about ice? When they consume it by the kilogram? Smell? Taste? Texture? It's pagophagia time and that's time to cool it.

Is pica just another obsession, a compulsion to consume the unusual? No one knows for sure, but this is certain, pica is hard to handle. Iron supplements, along with multi-vitamins are often obligatory. Nutritional education is imperative. Counseling helps and with a little good management,
pica will become passe. And that’s a peachy idea.

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