

# What's pica? Craving non-foods during pregnancy

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

Most women aren't accused of eating like a bird during pregnancy. Some, however, do experience a certain kind of craving that's named after the Latin word for a magpie: pica. You see, magpies are notorious for eating almost anything, and while many pregnant women crave pickles and ice cream, a small percentage end up craving things that aren't even edible.

The most common pica cravings include: chalk, charcoal, concrete, cleaning products, dirt and paint. Ice is also on the list, but come on, how is ice not considered edible?

Here's the problem. No one knows for sure what causes these cravings. Some believe it signals some sort of vitamin deficiency; others think the underlying factor might be a physical or mental illness. Whatever it is, it's important that you don't act on the impulse, no matter how much your mouth is watering. It's dangerous for you, and it's dangerous for the baby.

So when you find yourself walking into the newly renovated portion of your office building to smell



the paint, or sneaking into the laundry to grab a handful of Gain, know that you are not alone. First, get in to see your doctor. He or she will probably suggest a blood test to check for deficiencies, like iron or copper.

Once that's figured out, if you are still having the cravings, don't worry. We can suggest some alternatives that may help.

Dreaming about chalk, talcum powder or baking soda? Try a Tums, but don't overdo it. Too many may cause kidney stones, and you don't

need to deal with those while you're pregnant.

Craving charcoal, soot or ash? Charcoal actually isn't as bad as you might think. The kind made for human consumption is traditionally used for treating gas and bloating, as well as absorbing poisons in the intestines. Check with your doctor about how much is okay.

Have a hankering for concrete or cement? Try hard foods such as zwieback crackers (something your teething infant might like to gnaw on one day) or hard bread, made without yeast.

Desiring detergent or cleaning products? This one may actually be more psychological. They can cause serious damage, so instead try powdery foods or flours, gargling or swishing mouthwash. "Oil pulling" might also work. Take a tablespoon of oil (coconut, sesame, sunflower) and swish it around in your mouth for 10 to 15 minutes, and then spit it out. It's thought to be an oral detoxifier.



## Nutrition

Does dirt or mud look good to you? Try more red meat, products such as stone ground flour, or the same charcoal mentioned above. Another alternative that seems to be popular is strong iced tea because of its earthy taste.

Wanting paint or glue? No brainer on this one — don't even think about it. If you absolutely can't resist, only allow yourself to smell fresh paint in an open, ventilated area, from a distance. You might try food dye that's safe for human consumption.

Itching for ice? Have at it. Just be careful that you don't wreck your teeth. Dickey's BBQ uses the same type of ice machine my hospital had. It puts out those little ice pellets that aren't tough to chew at all.

You'll want to look for edible items with a texture similar to the thing you're craving. Nuts, berries, flour, cooked maize and flat bread are all viable, healthy alternatives.

What we do know is that eating non-food items can interfere with your body's ability to absorb nutrients and may even cause malnutrition. It may lead to health problems like lead poisoning or bowel blockage.

See your doctor first, and don't be afraid to be honest with her. It's not uncommon and there is help. Bon appetit!

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