PICA

Mariam Mumtaz Talat Aslam

1st Year MBBS, Islamabad Medical and Dental College, Islamabad, Pakistan

Key points:

- Introduction
- Causes
- Complications
- Diagnosis
- Management of Pica
- Conclusion

Introduction

Pica is a condition in which an individual repeatedly ingests non-nutritive items such as ice or dirt or other non-food items. [1] It is more commonly seen in children as compared to adults though it can happen at any age. These items can include hair and wood etc. This condition can arise due to a variety of underlying issues. [2]

Causes

Pica can occur due to a variety of reasons. One of the most common causes is nutritional deficiency such as deficiencies in iron or zinc which may lead to individuals craving non-nutritive food such as ice. It is also more commonly seen in individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds where access to proper nutrition may be limited. In addition psychological and developmental factors also play a role, as pica often occurs in association with conditions such as intellectual disability or behavioral disorders such as autism and obsessive compulsive disorder. [1] Pica may also be used as a coping mechanism for emotional distress. [3] It is also frequently observed in pregnant women. [2]

Complications

Pica can lead to a range of health complications depending on the substances consumed. It may result in intoxication such as lead poisoning, which can impair both physical and intellectual development, particularly in children. In addition, ingestion of non-food substances can cause gastrointestinal obstruction, which may require surgical intervention. Other complications include infections, parasitosis and nutritional deficiencies. In severe cases pica may also be associated with underlying mental health conditions. [1]

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of pica is primarily clinical and is based on a detailed dietary history including interviews with the patient and family members, along with a high index of suspicion. There are no specific tests to confirm the condition; however, investigations may be conducted to assess complications, such as nutritional deficiencies. In some cases, imaging techniques like abdominal radiography, barium enema or upper gastrointestinal endoscopy may be used to identify and locate ingested non-nutritive substances. [1]

Management of Pica

There is no specific cure for pica; however, it can be managed through a combination of approaches depending on the underlying cause. Behavioral therapy is often the primary treatment, helping individuals modify their behavior and develop healthier coping strategies. Counselling may be useful, especially when pica is associated with emotional distress or stress. Medical management, such as iron or zinc supplements, may be required if the condition is linked to nutritional deficiencies. In some cases, medication and behavioral modification techniques, including positive reinforcement, may also be used to reduce pica behavior. [2]

Conclusion

As noted above, pica is as an eating disorder in which an individual persistently consumes non-nutritive substances. [1] It can arise due to a variety of factors, including nutritional deficiencies and psychological causes, and may lead to complications such as lead poisoning, gastrointestinal obstruction, infections, and nutritional deficiencies. [1] There is no specific diagnostic test for pica; diagnosis is primarily clinical, based on dietary history and observation, although investigations may be conducted to assess complications. Management includes addressing the underlying cause through approaches such as counselling, behavioral therapy, nutritional supplementation, and, in some cases, medication. [2]

References

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