



Adult Blood Lead Epidemiology & Surveillance  
Texas Department of State Health Services

# How pica affects a pregnant woman and her unborn baby

Pica is an uncommon desire to eat items that people do not normally eat. Some items people with pica may eat are:

- Pottery pieces
- Dirt
- Paint
- Sand

Some researchers believe the cause of pica is from low levels of certain minerals in the body, or a response to high stress. Other possible causes of pica include:

- Pregnancy
- Learned behavior from a family member
- Cultural practices
- Mental illness

People with pica may not know that the non-food items they eat have high amounts of lead (e.g. pottery pieces, clay, paint and soil). They may not realize they are poisoning themselves. Often, people with lead poisoning do not feel sick. But lead poisoning can cause serious health problems, such as:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Poor muscle coordination
- Damage to the nervous system
- Hearing problems
- Seizures
- Coma or death

High levels of lead in a pregnant woman's blood can directly poison her unborn child. Her baby could be born with:

- Low birth weight
- Interrupted body growth
- Learning problems
- Behavior problems

If you or someone you know has pica:

- Ask your doctor for a lead test to identify lead in your body
- Talk to your doctor about how to change your eating habits safely

