

What Is Pica In Dogs? Causes, Symptoms, & Treatment - GoodRx

Key takeaways:

- Pica — most often seen in adolescent and adult dogs — is the compulsive urge to consume non-edible items, such as rocks, dirt, cardboard, and clothing.
- The cause of pica can be either medical or behavioral, and treatment varies based on the underlying cause.
- This disorder can be life threatening, especially when the ingested item is toxic or gets lodged in a dog's intestinal tract and causes a blockage.



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Dogs are curious creatures, especially as puppies, who explore their surroundings with their mouth. But when your pet starts eating inedible items — such as rocks, dirt, toys, and cloth — it could be a sign of pica.

[Pica](#) is when a dog has the urge to eat inedible items. “Just chewing on non-food items is not a sign of pica. The dog needs to be ingesting the item for it to be considered pica,” shares Dr. Amber Karwacki, a partner veterinarian with [Heart + Paw](#) in Philadelphia.

Some dogs stick to eating only one inedible object, while others may go after a wide variety of items, from cloth or paper to drywall.

Pica can endanger your dog's health by:

- Causing them to eat something toxic
- Hurting their teeth and gums
- Disrupting their digestive system
- Getting an object lodged in their intestinal tract

Signs and symptoms of pica in dogs

When your dog has pica, a clear sign is any complications caused by eating non-food items. Items can get stuck in the throat, stomach, or intestines and lead to symptoms such as:

- Vomiting
- Decreased appetite
- Pain in abdomen
- Drooling
- Gagging

“If the non-food item gets stuck in the stomach or intestines, you can see vomiting, decreased appetite, and pain in the abdomen,” says Karwacki. “Excessive drooling, as well as gagging, can be caused if a foreign material is caught in the throat.”

What causes pica in dogs?

The [cause of pica](#) can either be behavioral or medical, says Karwacki. If your pooch is bored or feeling anxious, they may resort to eating things they shouldn't. Dogs with [separation anxiety](#) are more likely to chew up and eat items in the absence of their humans.

Dog breeds with high energy and a lack of exercise or stimulation may also destroy and consume non-edible items. Any dog that doesn't have enough appropriate toys to chew on may also turn to other items.

When a dog is anemic, or cannot absorb nutrients in the food they are eating, they may experience a form of pica known as [geophagia](#). Dogs with this condition consume soil, clay, and dirt. Even though the causes may be different in pica and geophagia, the symptoms are the same.

[Eating poop](#), however, is a separate [condition called coprophagia](#). “If your adult dog starts to eat their own feces, there could be a nutritional imbalance,” says Karwacki. She suggests an exam and lab work at the clinic to help determine the cause of the imbalance.

How do you test for pica in dogs?

Generally, pica can be diagnosed by the dog's behavior alone. Your veterinarian will likely run blood tests to look for any other underlying medical conditions. They may also perform a thorough behavioral consult to determine if anxiety or boredom are driving your dog to consume non-food items.

How do you treat pica in dogs?

Treatment for pica will depend on whether the cause is medical or behavioral. For a medical condition, Karwacki says your veterinarian will prescribe treatments to manage the condition.

For anxiety, your dog may need [behavioral interventions](#), “along with possible anxiety medication if that is needed for the situation,” says Karwacki. Consult with a behavioral veterinarian to develop an individualized plan.

If your dog’s pica is caused by another behavioral issue, a number of strategies may be needed. For example, if your dog is bored or needs more activity, you can work to address these needs. At other times, training may be recommended.

Consider setting time aside every day to do some training exercises and games with your dog in the backyard, suggests Lauren Jay, a [dog trainer](#) in Queens, New York.

“Make your dog way more interested in interacting with you while burning off that extra mental energy that your stressed and/or bored dogs have bottled up that lead to pica,” says Jay. Additionally, pet parents can help their dogs by providing safe and sturdy chew toys and food puzzles.

If your dog starts eating rocks and dirt in the backyard, keep them on a leash, or block access to rocks using fencing. On walks, have treats or a toy ready to distract your pup and keep them from inedible items.

“A basket muzzle can also be used to physically prevent your dog from eating what they should not eat,” recommends Karwacki.

Do dogs grow out of pica?

Puppies do tend to put everything in their mouths. That’s part of their normal behavior, and most grow out of the phase, says Karwacki. Older dogs who develop pica will likely need intervention.

Pet parents can help their pups from a young age by training and teaching them what is appropriate to chew. Carefully monitoring your dog during playtime or time outdoors can also help prevent them from eating non-food items.

For those dogs that don’t grow out of it, behavioral training early on can help change their behavior. For example, Jay recommends redirecting your dog’s attention onto you within 2 seconds of them seeing a desired item. Then, walk in the opposite direction.

“Give food as a reinforcement,” says Jay. “Teaching ‘leave it’ and ‘drop it’ prior to the stressful situation will also be very helpful.”

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