A strange type of Pica

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ABSTRACT. Pica, where the patient eats non-food items such as mud, clay, varnish etc., is a common behavioural problem seen in children, pregnant women and the mentally retarded. However sponge pica is a very rare variation. We report a case of a 5-year-old Omani girl, who presented with sponge pica since the age of two years, with recent abdominal pain. Investigations showed anaemia, elevated liver enzymes and normal intelligence. There was no evidence of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Both clinical and laboratory findings showed complete recovery after a few weeks of oral iron therapy. Her appetite improved, and she started to gain weight. No recurrence was observed when followed up after two years. Awareness is necessary to detect and treat pica as early as possible to prevent its complications.

Keywords: pica, anemia, sponge pica, abdominal pain, Oman.

THE CASE

A 5-year-old Omani girl from a middle-class family presented with eating sponge since the age of two years. She started to suffer from abdominal pain and nausea, without vomiting. She extracted and ate sponge from furniture when others were sleeping or busy, and washed down large chunks of sponge by drinking water. Nothing in her history suggested compulsive behaviour, anxiety or depression. Her weight was 15.6 Kg (<10th percentile).

This child had been born of non-consanguineous parents, as the fourth among five children. She had been the product of normal gestation and delivery, weighed 3 kg at birth and had been breastfed for two years. The postnatal period had been uneventful, and her development was within normal limits. She used to sleep late and wake up early, without having day naps. She was a sociable child, mixing and playing with other children without difficulty, and tended to prefer children older than herself. There was no history of pica or other psychiatric disorders among her family or relatives.
During the consultation, she came across as smiling, yet shy and not very communicative, and calm. The clinical examination yielded normal results. Investigations showed high liver enzymes – alanine amino transferase (ALAT) at 49 U/l, aspartate amino transferase (ASAT) at 44 U/l, leucocyte count 12.1×10³ (lymphocytes 67%), low haemoglobin at 10.8 g/dl, low mean corpuscular haemoglobin (MCH) 22.3 pg/cell, low mean corpuscular volume (MCV) 67.4 fl, and thrombocytosis 596×10⁹/l. She scored average on Raven’s Intelligence Test.⁸

The child was prescribed ferrous fumarate syrup at 45 mg thrice daily after food for six weeks. The mother observed substantial improvement; the child nearly stopped eating sponge and showed a remarkable improvement in her appetite. Her blood tests showed a return to normal levels, and the liver enzymes decreased. She was given additional Iron syrup for another four weeks. Follow up during two years thereafter showed a stable condition without recurrence.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This is an unusual case of pica. A survey of the Internet only yielded one paper describing sponge pica.⁹ Although some attribute Pica to obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD),⁷ we did not find any evidence of OCD in this case. The drastic improvement in the patient’s state after anaemia correction is of interest, simulating other studies,¹⁰ and raises the question of whether the pica was caused by malnutrition. On the other hand, sponge, a hydrocarbon, might have affected bone marrow activity causing secondary anaemia. Indeed Pica can have serious medical implications⁶,¹¹ such as lead poisoning, helminthic infestations and iron-deficiency anaemia. The last could be due to competition of the ingested material with iron absorption, or its effect on bone marrow.⁶,¹³,¹² It is important for the parents and physicians to be aware of this often overlooked condition.

**REFERENCES**