Eating soap ? Obsession? [1]

Hi Alice,

I'm going to cut right to the chase. I eat soap. It makes me feel good, especially when I'm stressed. Well, I don't sit there eating whole bars at a time, but I do take little chunks off to nibble sometimes. Only bar soap though, the all natural ones (I like the taste).

Am I going to have long term side effects from doing this? Please answer back, I don't see a lot of research on this, even though I've heard of quite a few other people that do this. Is it necessary for me to talk to a professional about this?

It seems kind of silly, I was just wondering.

Thanks,
Soap-Eater

Answer

Dear Soap-Eater,

Kudos for thinking about how your behavior might affect your long-term health and writing in to ask about it! What you describe may be considered behavior associated with pica, which is considered a craving to eat non-nutritive, non-food items. The research is unclear as to why some people exhibit pica behavior, but there are some potential correlations (read on for more). Depending on the substance a person eats, pica behavior can pose some health risks?some of which are quite serious. Ingesting certain harmful substances or some substances in large amounts may lead to medical problems, such as poisoning. There?s also a risk of infection resulting from ingesting some substances (such as soil), as well as a risk of stomach-related issues. With that in mind, if you start to experience any negative symptoms that may be associated with eating soap (more on this later), it?s wise to speak with a health care provider. If you?re concerned about your behavior, you may ask yourself if stress is the main reason?and, if so, if there are some other strategies you might use to manage this stress.

The potential long-term health effects of pica behavior depend on the substance that?s eaten. For instance, paint chips may contain lead, and feces [2] may contain parasites?as you might imagine, these substances can lead to negative health effects such as poisoning and infection (respectively). Other common, non-food substances associated with pica include dirt, clay, cornstarch, glue, coffee grounds, ice, hair, sand, and toothpaste. Fortunately, soap is generally non-toxic and is less likely to lead to poisoning, though it could disrupt your health
with large amounts ingested over time. One possible long-term effect of eating soap to keep in mind is a blockage in or damage to the digestive tract. This side effect may require a medical intervention to remove or repair the issue.

Although pica behavior covers a wide range of substances eaten and ages affected, its causes aren't well-understood. Still, some suggest that the following may contribute to people's desire to eat non-food items:

- **Nutritional deficiencies:** While it's not entirely definitive, some researchers speculate that pica is the body's way indicating the need for a missing key nutrient. Iron [3], calcium, zinc, and vitamins C and D deficiencies have been found in people with pica. However, this potential link doesn't necessarily explain why some people have a desire to eat non-food items that provide no nutritional benefit or even interfere with nutritional absorption. In any case, folks who suspect that they have pica behavior are encouraged to seek medical attention to rule out any underlying health issues.

- **Culture and family influences:** There's some evidence to suggest that in certain cultures and social groups, eating non-food substances is not considered atypical. Also, if a person's parents encouraged eating these substances while their children were growing up, they themselves may have the urge to eat these substances as adults.

- **Stress:** Pica behavior may be a stress coping strategy. Or simply put, some people just enjoy eating non-food items! It could be the way the substance feels or tastes that relieves stress for some people. Again, research is still inconclusive about this specific interaction.

- **Developmental, cognitive, or mental health conditions:** In some cases, pica behavior has been associated with but not necessarily caused by autism spectrum disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder [4], schizophrenia [5], brain injuries, or epilepsy, especially when the person is older than two or three years old.

- **Pregnancy:** While pica behavior is not common during pregnancy, the non-food substances most craved during pregnancy are dirt, clay, and laundry starch.

As you mentioned, eating soap makes you feel good when you're under stress? this may be a sign that your stress level is too high and your body is reacting by craving soap. Have you considered adopting other ways to cope with stress? There are a number of alternative ways to combat stress? to learn what might work for you, check out Stress, anxiety, and learning to cope [6] and Number one cause of stress [7] in the Go Ask Alice! archives. If coping with stress on your own is overwhelming or difficult, consider talking with a health promotion specialist or a mental health care provider for additional support and ways to manage your stress and pica behavior. Further, a registered dietician can also suggest ways to manage stress-related cravings and snacking options.

Lastly, you may also consider talking with your health care provider to figure what might be causing your behavior and conduct tests for any nutritional deficiencies, infections, or toxins. Seeking medical attention is advised if you start noticing physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, belly pain, nausea, constipation, diarrhea, or bloating; these may be signs that there's buildup of the substance in your digestive tract. In the case that you've ingested a harmful substance, the National Poison Control Center [8] hotline is a resource that's confidential and offers non-emergency or emergency assistance.

Good looking out, Soap-Eater? you took a crucial first step in asking about your behavior. Taking care of your health is not silly? it's smart.
All the best,

Alice!

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If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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