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 is called pica, an eating disorder where people frequently eat non-nutritive (non-food) substances. Depending on what a person eats, pica can be very dangerous. Ingesting dangerous substances or large amounts of some substances can lead to medical problems, including poisoning. There is also a risk of infection resulting from some substances, such as soil, and stomach problems including constipation, and other issues.

Fortunately, in your case soap is not a very dangerous substance, though in large amounts over time it could disrupt your health. Soap is generally non-toxic and should not lead to poisoning. However, it can cause diarrhea, vomiting or skin irritation.

The causes of pica are not known but some suggest that the following may contribute to the desire to eat non-food items:

- **Nutritional deficiencies**: Some speculate that pica is your body's way of telling you that you are missing some important nutrient. Iron, calcium, zinc, and vitamins C and D deficiencies have been found in people with pica.
- **Culture and family influences**: There is some suggestion that certain cultures and social groups accept eating non-food substances. Also, if your parents encouraged this
as a child, you may still have the urge to eat these substances.

- **Stress**: The desire to eat non-food substances may be a coping strategy for stress.
- **Underlying biochemical disorder**: In some cases, pica may result from chemical imbalances in your brain.

You mentioned that eating soap makes you feel good when you're stressed. This could be a sign that your stress level is too high and your body is reacting by craving soap. You could consider finding alternative ways to deal with your stress. See [Stress, anxiety, and learning to cope](#) for some tips on other ways to combat stress.

Pica is rare in adolescents and adults, and can be the sign of other medical issues including nutrition deficiencies. As such, it's a good idea to contact a health care professional to help figure out what might be causing this behavior.

You took crucial first step in asking about your behavior. Taking care of your health is not silly? it's smart.

All the best,

Alice!

Category:
- Nutrition & Physical Activity
- Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders
- Food Choices & Health

Related questions

- Eating disorders vs. normal eating
- Does eating ice correct an iron deficiency?

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside)
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
- Medical Services (CUMC)
- Mental Health Service (CUMC)

Published date:
- Jan 18, 2008
- Dec 28, 2012
Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

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

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/eating-soap-%E2%80%94-obsession

Links