

Pica in pregnant teens linked to low iron

August 20 2014, by Melissa Osgood

In a study of 158 pregnant teenagers in Rochester, NY, nearly half engaged in pica – the craving and intentional consumption of ice, cornstarch, vacuum dust, baby powder and soap, and other nonfood items, reports a new Cornell study.

Moreover, such teens had significantly lower iron levels as compared with teens who did not eat nonfood substances.

Pregnant teens, regardless of pica, are at higher risk for low hemoglobin, which can lead to iron deficiency and [anemia](#). Low iron in [pregnant teens](#) raises the risk of premature births and babies with low birth weights, which in turn increases [infant mortality rates](#).

"In this study, the strength of the association between pica and anemia is as big as any known causal factor of anemia in pregnant teens; this is a very strong association," said Sera Young, a research scientist in [nutritional sciences](#) in Cornell's College of Human Ecology and a co-author of the study published online in the *Journal of Nutrition*.

In the study, pica behaviors and iron deficiency increased over the course of the pregnancies. "As anemia increased, so did these behaviors, but we don't know what happens first," said Kimberly O'Brien, professor of nutritional sciences and the study's senior author.

The study included African-American, white and Latina pregnant teens. Of the nearly 47 percent of adolescents who reported pica behaviors, most – 82 percent – craved ice, followed by starches, powders, soap,

paper, plastic foam such as pillow stuffing or sponges, baking soda, and a few other items.

Texture appears to be very important to those engaged in pica and is one commonality among the types of substances consumed.

When people crave ice, they consume "cups and cups and cups of it," said Young. At the same time, "ice is not going to change someone's iron status," said O'Brien, leading to her hypothesis that [iron deficiency](#) may have an effect on brain chemistry that leads to these cravings.

"The public health importance of pica really needs to be acknowledged," said Young. "My hope is that these studies put pica on the radar as a legitimate public health issue."

Provided by Cornell University

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