



Better Safe



WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR FAMILY'S SAFETY

You & Gambling

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SAFE BET



Anyone who has bought a lottery ticket or played bingo has gambled. Gambling is any game of chance in which money changes hands. It's common in most cultures around the world. Many people enjoy gambling as recreation without causing harm to themselves or others. Yet some people can't control their impulse to gamble, even when it takes a terrible toll on their lives.

For these gamblers and their families, researchers have been making progress in several areas. Scientists are learning why people have problems with gambling: how common it is, what goes on inside the gambler's brain, who is at risk and what kinds of treatment can help.

When Does It Become A Problem?

Problem gambling is defined by some researchers as gambling that causes harm to the gambler or someone else, in spite of a desire to stop. Between 2% and 4% of Americans struggle with this condition. Problem gambling can progress to a recognized psychiatric diagnosis called **pathological gambling**.

Pathological gambling may affect from 0.4% to 2% of Americans. "Pathological gambling comes with a constellation of problems that contribute to chaos," says Dr. Donald Black of the University of Iowa. "It's associated with worse physical health, excessive smoking, excessive drinking, not exercising, not seeing primary care doctors and worse dental care. It also fuels depression, family dysfunction, crime, bankruptcy and suicide."

Together, pathological and problem gambling may affect up to 5% of Americans. That number may rise, though. Laws in many states are creating more options for legal gambling, and internet gambling is becoming more common.

Still, gambling is often done in family settings, and condoned or encouraged by parents. And the younger you start, the more likely you are to get into trouble later on. About 3% to 8% of adolescents have a problem with gambling.

Dr. John Welte of the University of Buffalo has found that, across the lifespan, gambling problems are even more common than alcohol dependence. They are also much more common in males, in young people, and in people who live in relatively poor neighborhoods. "That's not true of the prevalence of alcoholism," says Welte. "Alcoholism is much more democratic. So think about motives for gambling. People are hoping that winning will improve their lot. That makes them more vulnerable to developing a gambling problem."

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Pathological Gambling: Risk, Treatments & Prognosis

Anyone who gambles runs the risk of developing a gambling addiction. When gambling becomes a problem—or if your gambling progresses to pathological gambling—you face several risks and complications.

Complications may include:

- Alcohol and drug abuse problems
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Financial, social, and legal problems (including bankruptcy, divorce, job loss, time in prison)
- Heart attacks (from the stress and excitement of gambling)
- Suicide attempts

Getting the right treatment can help prevent many of these problems.

Treatment

Treatment for people with pathological gambling begins with recognizing the problem. Pathological gamblers often deny they have a problem or need treatment.

Most people with pathological gambling only get treated when other people pressure them.

Treatment options include:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Self-help support groups, such as Gamblers Anonymous. Gamblers Anonymous is a 12-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. Practices used to treat other types of addiction, such as substance abuse and alcohol dependence, can also be helpful in treating pathological gambling.
- A few studies have been done on medications for treating pathological gambling. Early results suggest that antidepressants and opioid antagonists may help treat the symptoms of pathological gambling. However, it is not yet clear which people will respond to medications.

Like alcohol or drug addiction, pathological gambling is a long-term disorder that tends to get worse without treatment. Even with treatment, it's common to start gambling again (relapse). However, people with pathological gambling can do very well with the right treatment.

Signs Of Problem Gambling

Are you troubled by gambling? Seek help if:

- You always think about gambling.
- You gamble with money you need for other things.
- You keep gambling even though you may feel bad afterward.
- You get nervous when you try to quit.
- You need to gamble with increasing amounts of money to get the same buzz.
- You lose money, but you return to "chase" losses by gambling even more.
- You spend work, school or family time gambling.
- You tell lies to hide your gambling.
- You lose a job, educational opportunity or relationship because of gambling.
- You find that no matter how hard you try, you can't stop.

