

When Gambling Becomes a Bad Bet

Many people enjoy buying a lottery ticket, going to a casino, or making a bet on a sporting event. But if gambling gets out of control, it can result in pathological gambling, a disorder that can have devastating effects. An article in the July 11, 2001, issue of JAMA discusses the causes and treatment of pathological gambling and its increase in the United States.

What is pathological gambling?

Pathological gambling shares many symptoms with drug abuse. Characteristics of pathological gambling include:

- Preoccupation with gambling—reliving past gambling experiences, planning the next bet, or figuring out ways to get money for gambling.
- Needing more frequent and bigger bets for excitement.
- Lying to family members, friends, or others to conceal the problem.
- Inability to stop gambling despite repeated attempts to do so.
- Trying to “win back” losses.
- Restlessness and irritability when trying to stop gambling.
- Breaking the law to finance gambling habit.

Effects of pathological gambling

Some of the consequences of pathological gambling are:

- Financial problems that increase with time.
- Problems with marriage, long-term relationships, and friendships.
- Loss of job or job opportunities.
- Legal problems.

Pathological gamblers also have high suicide rates and tend to drink alcohol and abuse drugs more than other people.

You can get help

If you gamble and are experiencing symptoms of pathological gambling, the first step in getting help is to admit you have a problem and make a commitment to do something about it.

A consultation with your doctor is a great place to start. Additional resources are available through the organizations listed below.

For more information

- Gamblers Anonymous International Service Office
213-386-8789
www.gamblersanonymous.org
- The National Council on Problem Gambling, Inc.
800-522-4700
e-mail: ncpg@ncpgambling.org
www.ncpgambling.org

For family members and friends of people with gambling problems:

- Department of Human Services Addictions & Mental Health Division:
www.oregon.gov/DHS/addiction
- Oregon Problem Gambling Help Line Online:
www.1877mylimit.org
- Oregon Lottery® Problem Gambling Help Site: www.oregonlotteryhelp.com
- Gam-Anon International Service Office, Inc.
718-352-1671
www.gam-anon.org
- Gam-Anon:
www.gam-anon.org/meeting.asp

10 RULES OF RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING

1. If you choose to gamble, do so for entertainment purposes.
 - If your gambling is no longer an enjoyable activity then ask yourself why are you still "playing"?
2. Treat the money you lose as the cost of your entertainment.
 - Treat any winnings as a bonus.
3. Set a dollar limit and stick to it.
 - Decide before you go not only what you can "afford" to lose, but how much you want to spend. Do not change your mind after losing.
4. Set a time limit and stick to it.
 - Decide how much of your time you want to allow for gambling. Leave when you reach the time limit whether you are winning or losing.
5. Expect to lose.
 - The odds are that you will lose. Accept loss as part of the game.
6. Make it a private rule not to gamble on credit.
 - Do not borrow to gamble.
7. Create balance in your life.
 - Gambling should not interfere with or substitute for friends, family, work or other worthwhile activities.
8. Avoid "chasing" lost money.
 - Chances are the more you try to recoup your losses the larger your losses will be.
9. Don't gamble as a way to cope with emotional or physical pain.
 - Gambling for reasons other than entertainment can lead to problems.
10. Become educated about the warning signs of problem gambling.
 - The more you know the better choices you can make.

If you can't follow these suggestions, you may need to call:

**Gambling Help Line:
1-877-MY LIMIT**

Or Live chat•IM•e-mail: 1877mylimit.org

Oregon offers FREE professional, confidential, and effective treatment.

Counseling services for gamblers and their families are **available free of charge** in Oregon. All services are offered by experienced counselors. Outpatient and residential treatment is available. Call the Oregon Problem Gambling Help Line (**1-877-MY LIMIT**) for more information about Oregon's highly acclaimed system of problem gambling treatment. For e-mail, live chat, instant messaging and other problem gambling resources and information, go to **1877mylimit.org**.

Oregon's Gambling Evaluation and Reduction Program (GEAR)

GEAR is designed to provide gamblers with the tools and support to change unwanted gambling patterns without traveling to a counselor's office. GEAR combines phone consultation with certified counselors, workbook exercises and referral resources to give participants the tools and motivation to make good choices about if and how much to gamble.

For more information: 877-281-4327.

Gamblers Anonymous (GA)

Gamblers Anonymous provides people with an opportunity to share their experience, support and hope in order to stop gambling. They discuss 12-step recovery. The only membership requirement is a desire to stop gambling. A list of local meetings is available by calling the Oregon Problem Gambling Help Line at 1-877-695-4648.

Gam-Anon

Gam-Anon provides a supportive environment for the spouses, relatives, or close friends of problem gamblers to share their experiences. There is no membership fee. Participation in Gam-Anon will help you to realize you are not alone. A list of local meetings is available by calling the Problem Gambling Help Line at 1-877-695-4648.

Problem Gambling Education Resources

The Oregon Department of Human Services, Problem Gambling Services, loans books, journals, videos and other resources materials on problem gambling. To find out what materials are available call 800-822-6772.



CHANCES ARE, ONE OF THE PATIENTS YOU'LL SEE TODAY HAS A GAMBLING PROBLEM.



Problem gambling affects not only the gamblers and their family finances, but also their mental and physical well-being. Similar to other addictive behaviors, gambling is often considered a precipitating factor in a variety of health problems and gambling severity has been associated with higher rates of medical utilization.

If you treat adult patients, you've provided care to someone who has a gambling disorder – whether you knew it or not.

Although 1 in 10 primary care patients may have a gambling problem,¹ you won't find patients volunteering information about their gambling behavior. Instead, they present with secondary symptoms such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, tachycardia, angina, headaches, or other symptoms associated with stress.

Most health care providers are aware of problem gambling, yet studies find that very few ask their patients about problem gambling.^{2,3} Increased awareness and early intervention are the keys to reducing the personal, family, and social costs of problem gambling as early as possible.

Physicians can play an integral role in this process by recognizing early signs of problems, motivating patients to seek help, and readily providing useful referral resources such as the number to the Oregon Problem Gambling Help Line (1-877-MY LIMIT) or Live chat•IM•e-mail at 1877mylimit.org.

Problem gambling screening procedures

If patients present with symptoms that could be related to sustained stress, when you assess for behavioral conditions, include questions on gambling. If gambling is a frequent activity, then consider utilizing a simple screening tool - the Lie-Bet Questionnaire. This questionnaire is valid and reliable for ruling out pathological gambling behaviors.

REFERENCES

- 1 Pasternak IV, A.V. & Fleming, M.F. (1999). Prevalence of gambling disorders in a primary care setting. *Archives of Family Medicine*, 8, 515-520.
- 2 Christensen, M.H., Patsdaughter, C.A., & Babington, L.M. (2001). Health care providers' experiences with problem gamblers. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 17 (1), 71-79.
- 3 Sullivan, S., Arroll, B., Coster, G., Abbott, M., & Adams, P. (2000). Problem gamblers: Do GP's want to intervene? *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 113(1111), 204-207.

The Lie-Bet questions

1. Have you ever felt the need to bet more and more money?
2. Have you ever had to lie to people important to you about how much you gambled?

Educating patients about the risks of excessive gambling and referring patients who screen positive for problem gambling are important roles of primary care physicians. If a patient answers yes to one or both of the questions on the Lie-Bet Questionnaire, further assessment is indicated. Patients who might have a gambling problem should be encouraged to seek specialized treatment and provided with a help line referral.

Resources for clinicians

Oregon operates a 24-hour confidential problem gambling help line, **1-877-MY LIMIT** (877-695-4648). Operators are certified problem gambling counselors. In Oregon, problem gambling treatment is free, confidential, and effective. Over 1,500 individuals are treated each year in Oregon's system of state-funded problem gambling treatment centers. For e-mail, live chat, instant messaging and other problem gambling resources and information, go to **1877mylimit.org**.

JAMA patient page – when gambling becomes a bad bet

This page may be reproduced to share with your patients. On the back of the JAMA Patient Page, you will also find Oregon-specific problem gambling resources that can be reproduced for your patients.

If you would like additional materials to display in your clinic or provide to patients, please contact the Gambling Resource Center at 800-822-6772.

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, Gamblers Anonymous, Gam-Anon, National Council on Problem Gambling, Inc.

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DSM IV diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling

- A.** Persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior as indicated by 5 (or more) of the following:
- 1 Is preoccupied with gambling (e.g., preoccupied with reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the next venture, or thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble).
 - 2 Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement.
 - 3 Has repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling.
 - 4 Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling.
 - 5 Gambles as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression).
 - 6 After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" after one's losses).
 - 7 Lies to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling.
 - 8 Has committed illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement to finance gambling.
 - 9 Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gambling.
 - 10 Relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling.
- B.** The gambling behavior is not better accounted for by a manic episode.

