

How Problem Gambling Affects Health

Like other addictive behaviors, gambling is often considered a precipitating factor in a variety of health problems. Several studies have documented the relationship between problem gambling and specific health issues.¹

MENTAL HEALTH: Several studies placed problem gamblers at increased risk for dysthymia, major depression, anti-social personality disorder, phobias, and other mental conditions. Problem gamblers were also identified as being at increased risk for alcohol, nicotine, and other drug abuse.

CARDIAC ARREST: Studies generally placed problem gamblers at increased risk for cardiac arrest due to sustained stress and hypertension.

STRESS RELATED DIAGNOSES: Problem gamblers report higher levels of stress-related physical problems than average. Conditions may include: migraine headache, tension headache, irritable bowel syndrome, peptic ulcer, GERD, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, myalgias, and neurotic dermatitis.

Prevalence in a clinical setting

Within the general population, about 3% of adults manifest a gambling problem. However, the prevalence of problem gambling among persons entering a primary care setting appears to be closer to 10%². Of the thousands of problem gamblers that receive a medical intervention every year, less than 5% of them are ever diagnosed with a gambling disorder.

1: Potenza, M.N.; Fiellin, D.A.; Heninger, G.R.; Rounsaville, B.J.; & Mazure, C.M. (2002). Gambling: An addictive behavior with health and primary care implications. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 17, 721-732.

2: Pasternak IV, A.V. & Fleming, M.F. (1999). Prevalence of gambling disorders in a primary care setting. *Archives of Family Medicine*, 8, 515-520.

How to detect a gambling problem

Primary care physicians can better assist their patients by screening for problem gambling as part of the intake process, and by asking patients about problem gambling when they present with symptoms related to sustained stress.

The Lie-Bet tool is a reliable measure for ruling out pathological gambling as a clinical diagnosis.³ Ask your patients:

- Have you ever lied about how much you gamble?**
- Have you felt the need to bet more and more money?**

For complete diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling and a more comprehensive screening tool, log on to www.npgaw.org.

Intervention

Educating patients about the dangers 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 screen, then further assessment is

indicated. Patients suspected of manifesting a gambling problem should be encouraged to seek specialized treatment. Call the National Council on Problem Gambling 24-hour HelpLine **1-800-522-4700** for additional information or assistance making a referral. 4

3: Johnson, E.E.; Hamer, R.; Nora, R.M.; Tan, B.; Eistenstein, N.; & Englehart, C. (1988). The lie/bet questionnaire for screening pathological gamblers. *Psychological Reports*, 80, 83-88.