

# Gambling and SUBSTANCE ABUSE

# FACT SHEET

## The Connection Between Gambling Disorder and Substance Use Disorders

People who gamble can experience intense excitement, power and hopeful anticipation as a result of the “action” of gambling. For some who gamble, a dependency on the “action” of gambling takes place in a similar way to a dependency on the effects of alcohol or other drugs. Often, problem gambling is accompanied by substance abuse.<sup>1</sup>

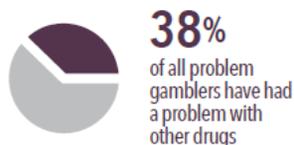
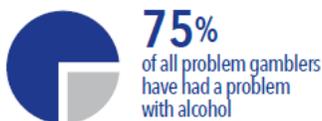


### Prevalence Rates

- The lifetime prevalence rate for alcohol use disorder is 18.6%<sup>2</sup>
- The lifetime prevalence rate for gambling problems is 2–3% which, while lower than alcohol levels, is similar to other substance use disorders:<sup>3</sup>
  - Cocaine use disorder ..... 2.8%
  - Amphetamine use disorder (e.g. methamphetamine)..... 2.0%
  - Opioid use disorder (e.g. oxycontin, morphine) ..... 1.4%
  - Heroin use disorder ..... 0.4%

Between **67,500** and **109,100** Massachusetts residents have experienced **GAMBLING PROBLEMS** during their lifetime<sup>4</sup>

Research from a national telephone survey on problem gambling and other disorders<sup>1</sup> shows that approximately:<sup>5</sup>



## CONNECTICUT COUNCIL on **PROBLEM GAMBLING**

### What is gambling?

Gambling is risking something of value on the outcome of an event when the probability of winning is less than certain.

### What is problem gambling or gambling disorder?

Problem gambling/gambling disorder is characterized by behavior that leads to adverse consequences for the gambler, others, and the community.

### What is social gambling?

Social gamblers gamble for entertainment, typically will not risk more than they can afford, often gamble with friends, chase losses briefly, gamble for limited periods of time, and are not preoccupied with gambling.

*See DSM-5 for more complete clinical definitions.*

**The Connecticut Council's Helpline:**  
**(888) 789-7777**

### Helpline workers provide:

- Live, confidential, and compassionate support 24-hours a day, 7-days a week
- Referrals to self-help groups, treatment providers, and other community resources

For more information, visit:  
<http://www.ccp.org>

## The Addiction Syndrome Model

Addiction can be thought of as the result of bad things happening from doing too much of something. The reward center of the brain teaches us to do things that bring pleasure or good feelings. Alcohol, drugs, and gambling all stimulate the reward center.

In the addiction syndrome model, to become addicted all of the following must be present:

- Risk factors
- Experience with the object
- Enjoyment from the feeling or mood produced by the gambling or object.<sup>9</sup>

## Gambling and Co-occurring Mental Health Disorders

Research shows a variety of mental health disorders are cooccurring with problem gambling. Disordered gambling is significantly associated with mood disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse.<sup>10</sup>

### Prevalence Rates

Comorbid psychiatric disorders commonly observed in people with gambling disorder include:

- Antisocial personality disorder
- Major depression
- Panic disorder
- Bipolar disorder
- Agoraphobia (fear of places and situations that might cause panic, helplessness, or embarrassment)
- Simple phobias.<sup>12-15</sup>

Suicide attempts and suicidal ideation are also elevated in this population.<sup>12-14</sup>

Even recreational gamblers are more likely than non-gamblers to meet psychiatric criteria.<sup>13</sup> It must also be noted that associations between gambling problems and major depression, dysthymia, panic disorder, and nicotine dependence are statistically stronger in women than in men.<sup>16</sup>

Problem gambling with:



## Possible Treatment Options

- Stronger associations between mental health and gambling disorders in women suggest that research and treatment efforts consider gender differences.<sup>16</sup>
- Screening for comorbid disorders upon entering treatment for gambling problems is recommended, as is monitoring for possible development of comorbid condition.<sup>10, 11</sup>
- Screening patients with depression or substance abuse problems for problem gambling and gambling disorder increases opportunity for treatment and prevention.<sup>12</sup>
- Treating major depression might be helpful for those diagnosed with gambling disorder, given the strong genetic overlap.<sup>14</sup>
- Medications normally used to treat psychiatric disorders may be effective in treating gambling disorder as well.
  - A 2006 study treated subjects with gambling disorder and co-occurring anxiety with a 12-week open-label trial of escitalopram (prescription SSRI drug used to treat depression and generalized anxiety disorder). This treatment was associated with improvements in gambling and anxiety symptoms and measures of psychosocial functioning and quality of life.<sup>17</sup>

## Signs of a Gambling Disorder

*A person shows signs of gambling disorder if he/she:*

- Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement.
- Exhibits restless or irritable behavior when attempting to cut down or stop gambling.
- Is preoccupied with thoughts about gambling.
- Gambles when feeling distress (e.g., helpless, guilty, anxious, depressed).
- Chases one's losses/returns another day to get even.
- Lies to conceal the extent of gambling.
- Jeopardizes a significant relationship, job, or opportunity because of gambling.
- Relies on others to provide money to relieve desperate financial situations caused by gambling.

For more information about gambling disorder, please refer to evaluation tools provided by the DSM-5.

**Although gambling disorder may have some distinct differences from substance use disorders, there seems to be some similarities as well. The boxes below highlight some of these similarities and differences.**

### **SIMILARITIES** between Gambling Disorder and Substance Use Disorders:

- Preoccupation with the activity
- Intense cravings
- Usage to medicate uncomfortable feelings
- Increased tolerance (needing more and more substance/activity to attain the same level of desired effect)
- Continued usage despite negative consequences
- Significant withdrawal symptoms

### **DIFFERENCES** between Gambling Disorder and Substance Use Disorders:

- There is no substance ingested
- There are no obvious signs such as odor, bloodshot eyes, slurred speech, or impaired body movement—causing it to be called the invisible addiction
- Gambling provides a legitimate hope that the next episode will yield a reward
- Loved ones/friends are often willing to provide a bailout for what appears to be a money problem

## Endnotes

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