

What is harmful gambling?

Definitions

Problem gambling refers to gambling with negative consequences and a possible loss of control. For example, people spending over their limit, gambling to win back money lost and feeling stressed about their gambling.

Moderate-risk gambling results in a moderate level of problems leading to some negative consequences. For example, people who sometimes spend more than they can afford, lose track of time or feel guilty about their gambling.

Low-risk gambling results in a low level of problems with few or no identified negative consequences. For example, people who may very occasionally spend over their limit or feel guilty about their gambling.¹

Affected others are people who are harmed by someone else's gambling—usually partners, family, whanau, and friends. This can take many forms, such as financial repercussions for the whole family, unhappy home life, alienation from family and friends, and crimes committed against employers or other people.

Is your gambling becoming a problem?

Take the test and find out. Answer **Yes or No** to the following:



1. Sometimes I've felt depressed or anxious after a session of gambling.
2. Sometimes I've felt guilty about the way I gamble.
3. When I think about it, gambling has sometimes caused me problems.
4. Sometimes I've found it better not to tell others, especially my family, about the amount of time or money I spend gambling.
5. I often find that when I stop gambling I've run out of money.
6. Often I get the urge to return to gambling to win back losses from a past session.
7. I have received criticism about my gambling in the past.
8. I have tried to win money to pay debts.

If you answered YES to 4 or more questions, gambling may be causing you problems in your life.

(Source: Sullivan, Sean. Eight Gambling Screen: Early Intervention Gambling Health Test.)

Risk factors

Gambling affects people from all walks of life, but certain factors increase the risk of harmful gambling.

Moderate-risk/Problem Gamblers are more likely to:

Spend longer than 60 minutes in a single session gambling on Electronic Gaming Machines (EGMs or 'pokies')

Gamble on continuous activities (such as pokies or casino table games where winnings can be immediately invested in further gambling)

Gamble weekly or more often

Experience 5 or more individual levels of deprivation

Have severe or high levels of psychological distress

Be of Māori or Pacific ethnicity

Be aged 18 to 39 years

Have higher rates of tobacco, alcohol, and substance (drug) use.²

How gambling gets you hooked

Gambling products use psychological tricks which take advantage of how human beings think

The Gambler's Fallacy

I haven't won all night... so I must be due for a big payout if I keep going!

This is wishful thinking, plain and simple. You have no greater chance of a payout than you did when you first sat down. Gambling exploits our misunderstanding of statistical probability and our ingrained belief in luck, even though statistics always prove us wrong.

The Near-Miss Effect

It was so close that time, I nearly had a big win!

A near-miss will trigger the same areas in your brain as if you had really won. These are also the same areas which are involved in drug addiction. All forms of gambling exploit this effect, but pokie machines in particular are programmed to show as many near-misses as they can get away with. Most countries legislate how many times they can do this.

Immersive Environments

How long was I playing?

Casinos, pokie machines and online gambling sites make you forget the outside world through clever design. They use dark backgrounds and deep but bright colours to attract and stimulate your brain. They use sound and light at random times to disorient you and trigger the near-miss effect. Most casinos have few clocks or windows so you lose track of time. In some countries pokies are required by law to tell the person at regular intervals how long they have been playing—this helps to break the gambling trance.

Brain stimulation

It was so exciting, I lost track of how much I was spending!

The anticipation of gambling causes raised heart rate, shallow breathing and other nervous system responses. Winning and losing cause even greater responses, which are tied directly into our brain's reward centres. Machine design amplifies these even more. The reward areas of your brain take all the bell-ringing and light-flashing as good news and reward your neurons with large hits of dopamine. And this happens even when you are losing!

¹ Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. (2018). Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). Retrieved from <https://responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/for-professionals/health-and-community-professionals/problem-gambling-severity-index-pgsi/>

² Abbott, M., Bellringer, M., & Garrett, N. (2018). *New Zealand National Gambling Study: Wave 4 (2015). Report number 6*. Auckland: Auckland University of Technology, Gambling and Addictions Research Centre.

PGF Group provides free and confidential counselling and support services