

OLDER ADULTS AND GAMBLING

Gambling, or playing a game of chance for money or other stakes, has become a popular activity for people of many ages—and seniors are no exception. While experts agree that most adults can gamble without a problem, prevalence studies conducted in Oregon find that 2.3% of the general population¹ and 1.2% of the older adult population become problem or pathological gamblers².

Gambling opportunities in most states are plentiful. Casinos, Lottery products, and Internet gambling are more available than ever. The increase in the number of people with gambling problems corresponds to the increase in availability of gambling opportunities.

Concerns about Older Adults and Problem Gambling

Gambling among older adults is different from gambling in younger age groups for the following reasons:

- When people are coping with big changes or losses they are more vulnerable to develop a gambling problem; many older adults face life transitions and losses, such as death of loved ones, end of career, or isolation from family and friends.
- Older adults who have gambled away their retirement savings don't have working years to make up their losses.
- Many older adults may not understand addiction, making them less likely to identify a gambling problem.
- Older adults appear less willing to seek assistance for a gambling problem than younger adults.
- Many older adults hide their gambling because of the stigma associated with it and health professionals rarely assess for problem gambling.
- Many older adults have easy access to gambling and are drawn to gambling to fill their time or to be with other people.
- Some older adults may have cognitive impairment that interferes with their ability to make sound decisions.

Problem Gambling—Signs and Symptoms

Problem gambling is a term that indicates a person's gambling compromises or damages their personal, family, or vocational pursuits. Problem gambling has a broad severity spectrum and its cause appears to be related to several factors. Below are some of the more common signs and symptoms of problem gambling:

- Gambling to calm nerves, forget worries, or reduce depression.
- Losing interest in other things, such as food.
- Talking about, thinking about, or planning to gamble and not doing other activities.
- Lying about gambling habits.
- Gambling alone or gambling more often.
- Getting into arguments about gambling.
- Going without basic needs in order to gamble.
- Needing to gamble more and more money in order to get the desired effect.
- Experiencing health problems related to gambling like lethargy, headaches, irritable bowel, bladder problem, anxiety, and depression.
- Having financial problems caused by gambling.

Getting Help

If you think you or someone you know may have a gambling problem, help is available. Untreated problem gambling can cause serious physical, emotional and financial problems, especially among older adults. In Oregon, treatment for problem gambling is free. Treatment options include telephone counseling, in-person individual counseling, and group counseling.

Call the confidential, 24-hour phone number below for information for help:

1-800-522-4700

Material in this handout is adapted from Elder Health Tips, Spring 2001, published by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

(Footnotes)

1 Volberg, R. (2001, February). Changes in gambling and problem gambling In Oregon: results from a replication study, 1997-2000. Salem, OR: Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation.

2 Moore, T. (2001, April). Older adult gambling in Oregon: an epidemiological survey. Salem, OR: Oregon Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation.