

SUBSTANCE USE AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Gambling is considered to be an addictive behavior, similar to substance use disorders, due to: tolerance, loss of control, withdrawal, fixation, chasing losses, lying, bailouts, gambling in response to negative affect, and negative consequences such as risked or loss of relationships, educational, or work-related opportunities.¹

Within the general population, the lifetime prevalence of drug use disorders is approximately **9.9%** and alcohol use disorders are **29.1%**.² In comparison, for individuals with problem gambling behaviors, rates of substance use disorders are estimated to be as high as **57.5%**.³



Being male, Black, having low socioeconomic status, alcohol misuse, tobacco dependence, and/or cannabis misuse are each highly significant risk factors for problem gambling among adults in the United States.⁴



Among young adults (age 18-27), those with at-risk gambling behaviors were 3-4x more likely to use cigarettes or other drugs (but not alcohol) than those with low-risk or without problematic gambling behaviors.⁵



Across studies, individuals who engage in gambling behaviors are more likely to engage in alcohol and/or substance use.³⁻⁷



Studies suggest that among individuals in substance use treatment, approximately 14-21% have engaged in problematic gambling.^{8,9}



Among adolescents within the United States, gambling behaviors have been associated with tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use.^{10,11*}

Those with substance misuse problems and/or dependence have three to four times the odds of engaging in problem gambling behaviors as those without a substance misuse classification.⁴

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*For more information regarding youth at risk and substance misuse please see the Impacts of Gambling on Youth At Risk brief.

ALCOHOL AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Alcohol use and problem gambling behaviors have a positive relationship, meaning as problem gambling behaviors increase, alcohol use tends to increase.⁴

- Alcohol use disorders are defined by the inability to stop or control alcohol use, despite adverse life consequences¹² Within community samples of individuals with problematic gambling behaviors alcohol use disorders have shown to have a prevalence rate of 28.1%.³
- Among treatment-seeking individuals for problematic gambling behaviors, alcohol use disorders have been shown to have a prevalence rate of 21.2%.⁵
- One study assessing alcohol use, substance use, and gambling rates in the general population found that the more individuals engage in gambling behaviors, the more frequently they will drink alcohol.⁴
- In a population-based study, individuals with problem gambling behaviors were shown to have higher rates of hazardous drinking (59.6%) compared to those who did not engage in gambling behaviors (23.7%).¹³

The more an individual gambles, the more likely they are to frequently consume alcohol.⁴

TOBACCO AND PROBLEM GAMBLING



- Studies have found a high prevalence rate of tobacco use among individuals who engage in problematic gambling behaviors.^{14,15} Recent findings suggest that 62% of those engaging in current problem gambling behaviors also regularly smoke.¹¹
- Among individuals who experience problematic gambling, co-occurring tobacco use (smoking) is associated with more severe problem gambling behaviors and increased psychological distress.¹²

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CANNABIS AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

- Among a general population sample, 1/3 of study respondents who currently have cannabis misuse/dependence also engaged in problematic gambling behaviors.⁴
- Among adults in the United States, cannabis use is associated with greater problematic gambling behaviors.¹⁶
- Lifetime-cannabis users, defined by individuals who endorsed using cannabis at least once in their life, are significantly more likely to engage in at-risk or problematic gambling behaviors than individuals who have never used cannabis.¹⁶
- Among a study of emerging adults, ages 18-27, those that gambled within the past year had more than twice the odds ratio of using cannabis weekly or more often (12.77%) compared to those who had not reported gambling in the past year (5.47%).⁵



ILLICIT DRUG USE AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

- 17% of individuals with problem gambling behaviors reported illicit drug use disorders.¹
- Those with no lifetime history of a drug-use disorder are two point six times more likely to achieve a 3-month period of gambling abstinence compared to those with a lifetime drug use disorder.¹
- Problem gambling is associated with poorer response to substance misuse treatment among patients who gamble than those who do not.¹
- Individuals with a drug use disorder are at over four times the risk of developing problematic gambling.⁷

STIMULANT USE

- One study looking at college students found that individuals who used stimulants were three times more likely to engage in problem gambling.¹⁹⁽¹⁷⁾ Stimulant use also predicted increased gambling one year later.
- Individuals with problematic cocaine use are more likely to engage in problematic gambling than recreational cocaine users and non-users.¹⁸

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OPIOID USE AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Problem gambling has a high lifetime prevalence among individuals in opioid maintenance treatment programs.¹⁹ Though prevalence rates vary from study to study, research consistently reports higher rates than what are observed in the general population.

- ◆ Research has shown that lifetime prevalence of problem gambling is higher in opioid maintenance treatment settings (61%) compared with alcohol or other prescription drug use treatment settings (11%). This remained constant even after controlling for age and gender of individuals in treatment, suggesting that regardless of age or gender, individuals entering opioid use treatment more likely than other forms of substance use behavior to have a potential problem with gambling.¹⁹
- ◆ Among adults in methadone maintenance treatment in Las Vegas, 16.8% of them were classified as having a gambling problem.²⁰
- ◆ Of adults entering methadone maintenance treatment for opioid use disorder, as high as 46% of them have met criteria for gambling disorder within the past year.²¹
- ◆ Among college students, current and historical misuse of prescription opioids was associated with an increased engagement in gambling behaviors.²²



- ◆ Another study that examined the prevalence of problem gambling behavior among individuals engaged in methadone maintenance reported 52.7% of individuals engaged in problematic gambling behaviors at some point in their lifetime and the majority had engaged in gambling within the previous two months.²³ This study also revealed that individuals in methadone maintenance treatment with pathological gambling had significantly worse mental and physical health.
- ◆ A study conducted in Finland found that among 244 individuals in opioid substitution treatment, 70.1% reported gambling within the previous year and 12.5% engaged in problem gambling within the past 12 months.²⁴
- ◆ Among over 400 patients engaged in methadone maintenance in New York City, 21% were classified as likely engaging in pathological levels of gambling.²⁵

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PROBLEM GAMBLING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Given the harmful relationship problem gambling has with physical health, prevention strategies and methods to intervene are important for community stakeholders to know about.

- Learn more about the harmful relationship between substance use and problematic gambling including prevention, treatment, and ways to support individuals who are seeking help.
- Integrate the harmful impact of problem gambling into education opportunities when discussing substance use concerns and/or developing partnerships.
- Use a brief assessment measure to identify gambling problems such as the Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen (BBGS) and assess functionality in areas of life (e.g., occupational, financial, social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal).^{26,27}
- Develop a harm minimization strategy. Take a responsible gambling approach and collaboratively plan what best aligns with their goals, while also promoting health and reducing harm.¹⁶



Interventions and Treatment^{27,28}

- Brief, early intervention (e.g., motivational interviewing or motivational enhancement).
- Social support groups such as Gambling Anonymous (GA) or SMART Recovery.
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy from specialists in addictive behaviors.
- Improve problem gambling behaviors by integrating gambling screening and referral processes into substance misuse treatment.¹
- Gambling-specific treatments may be most beneficial for treatment success of problem gambling behaviors, including in a substance use treatment setting.¹

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PROBLEM GAMBLING AND SUBSTANCE USE: RESEARCH CONTRADICTING THE LARGER BODY OF WORK

Some research suggests that the relationship between problem gambling and substance use is not consistent:

- In one longitudinal study, gambling did not predict substance use. Engaging in hazardous alcohol use, daily tobacco use or drug use also did not predict at-risk gambling 12-months later.²⁹
- Nicotine was found to reduce impulsivity in individuals who engage in problematic gambling.³⁰
- Alcohol consumption is associated with gambling frequency, but not problematic gambling.⁵

Key Findings

- Gambling disorder and substance use disorders have significant overlap; They have analogous diagnostic criteria, high comorbidity rates, shared genetic underpinnings, similar neurobiological effects, and common treatment approaches.¹
- Individuals engaging in problematic gambling behaviors are more likely to engage in alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use than individuals not engaging in problematic gambling.
- Specific risk factors for problem gambling include: being male, Black, of low socioeconomic status, alcohol misuse/dependence, tobacco dependence, and cannabis misuse/dependence.⁴
- The high rates of comorbidity between problem gambling and substance use suggest that integrated treatments are an area of high need and have great potential for improvements in overall well-being.¹

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