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A review of research literature on ADHD and pathological gambling

What this research is about

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common mental health disorder in children. There are three subtypes of ADHD. A child may be diagnosed with the hyperactive-impulsive subtype. The main symptoms are being hyperactive and impulsive. The inattentive subtype has poor attention and difficulties concentrating on task. The combined subtype has symptoms of being hyperactive, impulsive and inattentive. While ADHD occurs mainly in childhood, some adults continue to have ADHD symptoms.

Research has found that youth with ADHD are more likely to take risks and engage in gambling than youth without ADHD. Adolescent gambling can lead to serious consequences, including poor school performance and debt. The pathways model of problem gambling proposes that impulsive traits contribute to the development of gambling problems, along with other social, emotional and biological factors. This review article summarized the results of 10 research studies published between 2006 and 2013. It aimed to examine the biological, psychological and social factors that increased the risk of pathological gambling in individuals with ADHD.

What the researcher did

PsycINFO and PubMed were searched for studies that examined both ADHD and gambling behaviour. PsycINFO is a database for behavioural and social sciences. PubMed is a database for biomedical and life sciences. The researcher selected studies that examined biological, psychological or social factors related to both ADHD and gambling behaviour. A total of 10 studies published between 2006 and 2013 were reviewed.

What you need to know

This review article examined the link between ADHD and gambling behaviour. It summarized the results of 10 research studies that were published between 2006 and 2013. In all studies, the hyperactive-impulsive subtype of ADHD was most consistently associated with pathological gambling. Adults with ADHD symptoms since childhood had more gambling problems than adults without ADHD or with ADHD in childhood only. Education and employment might have an effect, although results were mixed. Results on impulsivity were also mixed. Some studies found that pathological gamblers with ADHD were more impulsive than gamblers without ADHD. Other studies did not find a difference. The researcher suggested an integrated approach to understanding the link between ADHD and gambling behaviour. The approach would consider biological (e.g., genetics, hyperactive-impulsive subtype), psychological (e.g., tendency to act impulsively), and social factors (e.g., education, employment).

What the researcher found

Only one out of the 10 studies did not find a link between ADHD symptoms and gambling behaviour. Four studies found that a history of ADHD increased the severity of gambling problems. Another study found that gambling problems were more prevalent among adults with ADHD symptoms compared to adults without ADHD or with ADHD in childhood only. In all studies, the hyperactive-impulsive subtype was most consistently associated with pathological gambling.

Age and gender did not seem to have an effect on the link between ADHD and gambling behaviour. Education and employment might have an effect, although results were mixed. A study found that gamblers with ADHD were less likely to have graduated from high school than gamblers without ADHD. One study found that gamblers with the hyperactive-impulsive subtype had a higher unemployment rate. But another study did not find any difference in education or employment status.

Results on impulsivity were also mixed. Two studies found that pathological gamblers with ADHD were more impulsive than gamblers without ADHD. Another two studies did not find a difference. One study found that pathological gamblers with ADHD were less able to delay rewards and control their behavioural response. Prevalent rates of mood and anxiety disorders, as well as antisocial personality disorders, were high among at-risk and pathological gamblers with ADHD.

The researcher suggested an integrated approach to understanding the link between ADHD and gambling behaviour. The approach would consider biological (e.g., genetics, hyperactive-impulsive subtype), psychological (e.g., tendency to act impulsively), and social factors (e.g., education, employment).

How you can use this research

This review can be used by intervention providers and researchers to better understand the link between ADHD and gambling. More longitudinal studies are needed to establish a causal relationship between the two disorders. Future research should also look at common genetic and biological factors.

About the Researcher

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Citation

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Keywords

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, gambling, biological, psychological, social, predictor variable

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