research snapshot

summarize | mobilize

ADHD is linked to severe gambling problems in adults

What this research is about

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common mental disorder in children, which can persist into adulthood. Many individuals with ADHD are not properly diagnosed and do not receive treatment. Individuals with ADHD have trouble paying attention, cannot control their impulses, and are easily frustrated. Adults with ADHD often suffer from other conditions, such as alcohol or drug addiction, mood and anxiety disorders, and eating disorders. However, few studies have investigated the link between ADHD and pathological gambling.

Pathological gambling is when individuals cannot stop gambling even though they suffer severe negative consequences. These can include personal, familial, and social consequences. Results from previous studies suggest a relationship between ADHD and pathological gambling. But more research is still needed to understand if gender and culture affect this relationship.

In this study, the researchers investigated if adults being treated for pathological gambling suffered from ADHD as a child, and if their ADHD symptoms persisted into adulthood. The researchers also explored factors associated with ADHD, and the relationship between ADHD and gambling in males and females.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants by placing posters and flyers in waiting rooms of five gambling treatment centres in Vienna, Austria. Staff were also encouraged to tell patients about the study. Participants were 80 adults between 21 and 70 years old, and were being treated for gambling-related problems. A clinical psychologist interviewed the participants. During the interview, participants were assessed for pathological gambling symptoms. The researchers divided them into three groups: at-risk of developing pathological gambling, pathological gamblers, and severe pathological gamblers.

The interview also assessed participants for their attitudes and beliefs about gambling, symptoms of ADHD and the type of ADHD they suffered from, history of childhood ADHD, and co-morbid mental health problems. Participants were also asked about their use of ADHD medication.

What you need to know

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between ADHD and pathological gambling. Participants were 80 adults seeking treatment for gambling problems. A clinical psychologist interviewed the participants. About 43% of patients had suffered ADHD as a child, and about 11% of patients still had ADHD symptoms as an adult. Patients who suffered from ADHD as a child and as an adult had more severe gambling problems and more co-morbid mental health conditions than patients who never had ADHD. Patients who abused alcohol or drug were more likely to have a history of ADHD. Gender did not appear to affect the relationship between ADHD symptoms and severity of gambling problems. Gambling treatment providers should screen and treat their patients for ADHD and other mental health conditions to improve treatment outcomes.

What the researchers found

Most patients had severe pathological gambling. Many had ADHD as a child (42.5%), and nine participants (11.3%) still suffered from ADHD as an adult. These findings are similar to previous studies on ADHD and pathological gambling. The findings suggest that ADHD is more common among pathological gamblers compared to the general population. The researchers also found that patients with a history of ADHD had more severe gambling problems than patients who never had ADHD.

Most patients had one or more co-morbid mental health conditions, such anxiety disorder. Many patients were at risk of suicide. Compared to patients who never had ADHD, patients with a history of ADHD were more likely to have co-morbid conditions. Also, patients who had ADHD as an adult were more likely to have co-morbid conditions than patients who only had childhood ADHD. These findings suggest that having pathological gambling and ADHD at the same time increases the risk of co-morbid mental health conditions. Patients who abused alcohol or drug were four times more likely to have a history of ADHD. Patients with a mood disorder were three times more likely to have a history of ADHD.

There were no differences between men and women with regard to childhood or adult ADHD. This finding suggests that gender does not affect the relationship between ADHD symptoms and severity of gambling problems. However, compared to women, men had been gambling for longer and had also suffered from gambling problems for longer. Women were older when they first started gambling, but tended to develop gambling problems faster than men.

Only about one in eight patients with a history of ADHD had been prescribed medication to deal with the disorder in the past. None of the patients were currently receiving ADHD medication. These findings suggest that few pathological gamblers receive adequate treatment for ADHD.

How you can use this research

This research shows that gambling treatment providers should screen their patients for childhood and adult ADHD. They should also screen their patients for co-morbid mental health conditions, such as anxiety and substance abuse. By identifying and treating these underlying health conditions, treatment providers may improve the treatment outcomes of their patients. This research also raises the importance of including women in gambling treatment programs.

About the researchers

Laura Brandt is affiliated with the Department of Applied Psychology: Work, Education and Economy at the University of Vienna in Austria. **Gabriele Fischer** is affiliated with the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the Medical University of Vienna in Austria. For more information about this study, please contact Laura Brandt at laura.brandt@univie.ac.at.

Citation

Brandt, L., & Fischer, G. (2017). Adult ADHD is associated with gambling severity and psychiatric comorbidity among treatment-seeking problem gamblers. *Journal of Attention Disorders*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1087054717690232

Keywords

Adult ADHD, pathological gambling, problem gambling, comorbidity, impulsivity

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License.