

research snapshot

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Online interventions for people with problem gambling and unhealthy alcohol use

What this research is about

Gambling can result in harms to both the individual and their loved ones. Yet, many people do not seek treatment. This may be due to many reasons, including a lack of accessible treatment. But, people may be interested in self-help or Internet-based interventions.

Gambling problems tend to co-occur with other addictions. In particular, unhealthy alcohol use and problem gambling frequently co-occur. Unfortunately, Internet interventions rarely address these co-occurring problems. The researchers examined the benefit of adding an intervention for unhealthy alcohol use to an online gambling intervention.

What the researcher did

The researchers did a randomized controlled trial. The interventions consisted of a gambling only or a gambling plus alcohol intervention.

The online gambling intervention was adapted from a self-change booklet. This intervention provided strategies to help people change their behaviours and thinking to reduce their gambling. The intervention consisted of four parts. The first part helped people to self-assess their gambling. The second part helped people to set goals. The third part helped people to reach their goals, and the fourth part was about maintaining their goals.

In the gambling and alcohol intervention, the gambling intervention was the same. The alcohol intervention was a brief personalized feedback. In this intervention, participants received a summary of

What you need to know

Problem gambling tends to co-occur with unhealthy alcohol use. The researchers did a randomized controlled trial. They looked at if adding a brief feedback on unhealthy alcohol use could improve the effects of a gambling intervention. A total of 282 participants concerned about their gambling and interested in online help took part in the study. They were randomly assigned to either a gambling and alcohol, or gambling only online intervention. It was found that 80.5% and 41.1% met the criteria for problematic gambling and unhealthy alcohol use, respectively.

Follow-up rates were 80.1% and 84% at 3 and 6 months. Problem gambling reduced over time for both groups. However, there were no differences between the groups. Unhealthy alcohol use did not reduce over time for both groups. Also, there were no differences in alcohol use between the groups. The interventions helped reduced problem gambling but not unhealthy alcohol use.

their drinking. Importantly, the report compared their drinking to others who are like them.

Participants were recruited using online advertisements in Canada. The ads invited people who were concerned about their gambling and also interested in online help. The alcohol intervention was not mentioned. The Problem Gambling Severity Index was used to screen the participants. Only adults over the age of 18 and who scored 3 or more on the PGSI could participate. A total of 282 participants took part in the study. They were randomly assigned

to either the gambling only or gambling and alcohol intervention. Participants were matched on important characteristics such as age and gender.

Participants also completed a survey. This included how many days they gambled in the past month. The NORC DSM-IV Screen for Gambling Problems assessed their gambling problems in the past three months. Past treatment history of problem gambling was also assessed. The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test measured unhealthy alcohol use. Participants were also asked the number of drinks they typically drank in a week in the past three months.

Participants completed the interventions on their own time. Participants were then re-contacted at three and six months.

What the researcher found

Participants had quite severe gambling problems. At baseline, 80.5% met the cut-off of problem gambling based on the PGSI. The most common gambling types were slot machines (51.8%) and video lottery terminals (45.4%). 41.1% of participants met the cut off for unhealthy alcohol use. The follow-up rates were 80.1% at 3-months and 84% at 6-months.

About 80% of participants did at least one part of the online interventions. 28% completed two or more parts. There were no differences between the two interventions on this aspect. Among participants who also got the alcohol feedback report, 66.2% took a look at the report.

Both interventions led to reduced problem gambling over time. But, the gambling and alcohol intervention did not lead to greater improvements. For both interventions, unhealthy alcohol use did not reduce over time. There were also no differences between the interventions on alcohol use.

How you can use this research

This study can be used to inform online help for people with both gambling and alcohol use problems. In this study, the brief alcohol use feedback was a stand-alone intervention and not part of the gambling intervention. Researchers can build upon the findings

to better combine the gambling and alcohol interventions. Researchers can also find ways to help people engage more with online interventions.

About the researchers

John A. Cunningham, Christian S. Hendershot, Christina Schell, and Alexandra Godinho are affiliated with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, Canada. John Cunningham and Christian S. Hendershot are also affiliated with the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada. **David C. Hodgins** is affiliated with the University of Calgary in Calgary, Canada. **Matthew Keough** is affiliated with York University in Toronto, Canada. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to John Cunningham at john.cunningham@camh.ca.

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (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 safer 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.

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