

research snapshot

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Men who are highly involved in fitness may be at risk of problem gambling

What this research is about

Problem gambling is when someone's gambling habits cause them harm. Researchers estimate that 0.1–5.8% of people suffer from problem gambling. Problem gambling is about 3–4 times more common in men than women.

Some research suggests that athletes may be at higher risk of problem gambling than the general population. In one study, about 8% of male athletes suffered from problem gambling. Another study found that 14% of male elite athletes had problem gambling, whereas only 1% of female elite athletes did. People who participate in sports may be more competitive or sensation seeking. These personality traits may be linked to addictive behaviours, such as gambling. Additionally, sports betting is very popular, and people may see it as a socially acceptable form of gambling. The link between sports and gambling may be strengthened by advertising. The gambling industry often uses high-profile athletes to advertise their products.

Problem gambling appears to be more common in elite athletes, and particularly male athletes. The culture of elite sports can influence other people who exercise and play sports. Therefore, this study looked at the frequency of problem gambling in people who exercise at least 3 times per week.

What the researchers did

The researchers sent 'fitness influencers' (i.e., people with high profiles in the fitness world) a link to an online questionnaire. They asked the influencers to distribute the questionnaire on their social media and fitness forums. Anyone who followed the fitness influencers on social media could fill out the

What you need to know

Problem gambling may be more common in elite athletes compared to the general population. Problem gambling seems to be especially prevalent in male athletes. This study tested whether problem gambling is more common in people who exercise at least three times a week.

Participants were recruited from fitness forums. The participants filled out a survey that asked about their exercise and gambling habits. 12% of male participants had problem gambling, whereas only 1% of female participants did. This matches previous research showing higher levels of problem gambling in athletic males. Problem gambling was also associated with younger age, risky alcohol drinking, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and less frequent exercise.

questionnaire. The researchers only used data from participants who were at least 15 years old and who exercised at least three times per week. A total of 3088 participants met the criteria and completed the survey. About 64% of participants were men and 36% were women.

The questionnaire used the two item Lie/Bet scale to measure problem gambling. This scale asks people two questions about gambling. The first asks if they have ever had to lie to people important to them about how much they gambled. The second asks if they have ever felt the need to bet more and more money. If participants answered yes to either question, they were categorized as having problem gambling.

The questionnaire also asked participants about their age, gender, and how often they exercised per week. It also asked them if they had ever been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, social phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or other mental health issues. Finally, participants answered questions about their smoking habits, and drug and alcohol use. For alcohol use, they filled out a short version of the AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test).

What the researchers found

Based on the Lie/Bet scale, 7.8% of participants had problem gambling. Just over 4% reported lying about their gambling, and 5.8% reported feeling the need to bet more and more money. When looking at men and women separately, 12% of male participants had problem gambling, whereas only 1% of female participants did. The higher rate of problem gambling in men matches previous work showing higher rates of problem gambling in male elite athletes.

The researchers compared participants who had problem gambling to those who did not. They found that participants with problem gambling were more likely to report risky alcohol drinking and obsessive-compulsive disorder. These participants were also younger in age and exercised fewer days a week. There was some indication that daily smoking and use of certain drugs might be more common in participants with problem gambling.

How you can use this research

This research shows that the rate of problem gambling may be higher in athletic people compared to the general population. In particular, men who are involved in fitness and athletics. This is one of the first studies looking at problem gambling in the fitness world. So, future work should continue to look at the link between fitness, sports, and problem gambling.

About the researchers

Anders Håkansson, Artin Entezarjou, and Björn Gunnarsson are affiliated with the Department of Clinical Health Sciences Malmö, Primary Care, at Lund University in Malmö, Sweden. **Göran Kenttä** is affiliated with The Swedish School of Sport and Health

Sciences in Stockholm, Sweden; the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa in Ontario, Canada; and the Swedish Sport Federation in Stockholm, Sweden. **Fernando Fernández-Aranda** and **Susana Jiménez-Murcia** are affiliated with the Pathological Gambling Unit in the Department of Psychiatry at Bellvitge University Hospital in Barcelona, Spain; the Ciber Fisiopatología Obesidad y Nutrición at the Instituto de Salud Carlos III in Barcelona, Spain; and the Department of Clinical Sciences at the University of Barcelona in Spain. For more information about this study, please contact Anders Håkansson at anders_c.hakansson@med.lu.se.

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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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