

research snapshot

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Patients seeking mental health services have higher risk of problem gambling

What this research is about

Gambling has become a major public health concern in many countries, including Australia. This is because while many people gamble without problems, some do develop problem gambling behaviour. Problem gambling is continuous gambling that causes negative consequences. For example, it can negatively impact the mental health and financial status of the gambler.

Past reviews, mostly from the United States, have found that problem gambling is over-represented in people with mental health disorders. However, there is limited research from Australia that examines this phenomenon. This study aimed to determine the prevalence of gambling problems in a sample of patients seeking treatment from outpatient mental health services in Victoria, Australia.

What the researchers did

The researchers collected data from 837 outpatients seeking treatment from eight mental health services in Victoria, Australia. All participants were at least 18 years of age. The researchers collected data via an online survey. A paper copy was provided if participants were unable or unwilling to complete the online version. The survey ran from June 2015 to January 2016. It assessed demographics, gambling behavior, substance use and mental health diagnosis.

Demographic information included gender, age, education, and if participants lived in urban or rural areas. It also included employment status, income, relationship status, and type of mental health service sought. Gambling behavior included frequency for different gambling activities (e.g., electronic gaming machines, lotteries), and amount of money spent. Participants were also assessed for how severe their

What you need to know

This study examined the prevalence of problem gambling in patients seeking mental health services in Australia. About half of patients gambled, with gambling being more common in men. The most common activities were electronic gaming machines and lottery. Patients were more likely to be a problem gambler if they were diagnosed with a current psychotic disorder, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, or drug use disorder. Also, moderate-risk and problem gamblers had higher rates of nicotine and drug dependence. Low-risk gamblers had higher rates of hazardous drinking. Mental health clinicians should consider screening for gambling problems. Mental health services should also ensure staff and patients are educated about the risk of problem gambling.

gambling problems were. Based on their problem gambling severity, participants were classified into four groups: non-problem gambling, low-risk gambling, moderate-risk gambling, and problem gambling.

The survey also asked if a mental health professional had ever inquired about gambling behavior. It captured substance use and mental health diagnoses. Substance use included hazardous drinking, nicotine dependence, and illicit drug use. For mental health diagnoses, participants were presented with a list of disorders (e.g., anxiety, eating disorder, gambling disorder), and selected which disorders they had ever been diagnosed in their lifetime. They were also asked which disorders they had within the past year.

What the researchers found

The majority of participants had a lifetime or current mental health diagnosis. Almost half of the participants smoked tobacco or gambled to some degree in the past year. The majority of those who gambled were men. Fewer participants reported illicit drug use or hazardous drinking.

Most gambling took place at a land based venue, and the most common gambling activities were electronic gambling machines and lottery. Participants who were current gamblers (i.e. gambled in the past month) reported spending on average just under \$200 a month on gambling. Problem gamblers spent significantly more compared to other gambling groups. One in five participants was identified to be either a low-risk, moderate-risk, or problem gambler. However, less than half had ever been asked by a mental health professional about their gambling behavior.

The risk of being a problem gambler or a moderate-risk gambler was doubled in patients with a current psychotic disorder. Those with a current drug use disorder were also four times more likely to be problem gamblers compared to those without a drug use disorder. Patients with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder also had double the risk of problem gambling. Hazardous drinking was associated with an increased risk of low-risk gambling. Nicotine and drug dependence were associated with an increased risk of moderate-risk or problem gambling.

How you can use this research

These findings provide evidence to support that individuals with mental health disorders are at an increased risk of gambling problems. Mental health clinicians should therefore implement routine screening for gambling. Mental health services also need to raise awareness and educate staff and patients about the risk of problem gambling. The findings also support the need for future research to examine the effectiveness of treatment approaches with this population and highlight the importance of establishing referral pathways .

About the researchers

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Citation

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Problem gambling, mental health, alcohol, nicotine, illicit drugs

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