

knowledge snapshot



Internet-based treatments can be effective at treating problem gambling

What this article is about

Up to 6.5% of adults experience gambling problems. Gambling problems can lead to various harms. These harms can include financial harm, emotional distress, health problems, and reduced performance at work.

Psychological treatments for problem gambling include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and motivational interviewing. In CBT, patients learn strategies to control their gambling behaviour and cope with negative thoughts and emotions.

Motivational interviewing focuses on motivating people to change their behaviour. However, few people with problem gambling seek treatment. This may be because of the stigma around problem gambling. It could also be because it is difficult to access treatments due to costs or travel time.

Internet-based treatments may help overcome some of these barriers. In internet-based treatments, people exchange emails or chat online with therapists, or participate in online treatment programs on their own. This means they can seek help anonymously, which may reduce barriers due to stigma or shame. It also means they do not have to travel to treatment facilities, saving them both time and money. This study reviewed and analysed studies on internet-based treatments for gambling problems.

What was done?

The authors searched for peer-reviewed articles on the following databases: PsycINFO, MEDLINE, Web of Science, and the Cochrane library. The authors initially found 5230 journal articles. They reviewed the titles and abstracts to check that the articles met the following inclusion criteria:

Why is this article important?

Most people with gambling problems do not seek treatment. This may be because of barriers to seeking treatment, such as stigma, costs, or lack of time. Internet-based treatments may remove some of these barriers. This article is important because it analysed studies on internet-based treatments for gambling problems. The authors found 13 studies that met their criteria. These studies used a variety of different treatment techniques. Overall, these studies show that internet-based treatments greatly reduce gambling symptoms. They also somewhat reduce gambling frequency and money lost on gambling. Thus, internet-based treatments hold promise as effective treatments for problem gambling.

- Were randomized controlled trials where adult participants were randomly assigned to different treatment groups.
- Had at least one internet-based treatment.
- Recorded problem gambling severity.
- Reported treatment outcomes for general, gambling symptoms, gambling frequency, and/or amount of money lost gambling.
- Written in English or a Scandinavian language.

Only 13 of the articles met all the criteria. The authors analyzed the results of these articles. They looked at participant characteristics, whether there was a control group (i.e., no active treatment), and what outcomes were measured. They also compared studies where participants interacted with therapists online to ones without therapist support.

What you need to know

There were 2183 participants in total across the 13 studies. In 10 studies, the participants met the cut-off score for problem gambling on a screening tool (e.g., Problem Gambling Severity Index). In two studies, the participants met the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. In one study, the participants self-referred. Additionally, nine studies had a control group, and four studies compared results across different treatments without a control.

Across the 13 studies, there were 22 different interventions for gambling problems. Thirteen of the interventions used CBT, some with and some without therapist interactions. Other interventions gave feedback and advice, used behavioural couple therapy, or taught the participants how to avoid gambling situations. Some interventions had only one session, while others included up to 28 sessions.

Across the studies, general gambling symptoms decreased with the internet-based treatment. The decrease was found both right after treatment as well as at longer-term follow ups. Gambling frequency and amount of money lost also decreased with treatment. However, this change was not as large as the change in gambling symptoms. Studies with a control group tended to report smaller effects on gambling symptoms and frequency than studies without a control group. Studies with therapist support tended to show better improvements in gambling symptoms than studies without therapist support. Additionally, studies where people had higher baseline problem gambling severity tended to show better improvements in gambling symptoms. Overall, these results suggest that internet-based treatments are effective at treating problem gambling.

Who is it intended for?

This study is intended for clinicians and researchers. The authors suggest that future studies could look at the effectiveness of online treatments that use mobile apps. They also suggest future studies could look at the effects on other financial, health, and social outcomes related to gambling.

About the researchers

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