

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. Do I have to give up all gambling?

Not necessarily. Different kinds of gambling get to people in different ways. It may be possible to control or limit your gambling on one kind of gambling without worrying about other kinds.

For example the type of gambling that causes the most problems in NZ is electronic gaming machines (EGMs) or pokie machines. These can be a highly addictive form of gambling and pokies gambling is the main problem area for 85% of Gambling Helpline callers.

Most pokies gamblers need to eliminate gambling on pokie machines but less addictive kinds of gambling such as raffles and lotto may be irrelevant to their gambling problem.

2. Are some kinds of gambling more addictive than others?

Yes. Gambling on high frequency events tends to be more problematic than gambling on infrequent events. This is why pokie machines (EGMs) gambling is so addictive. On an EGM or pokie machine, the gambler makes a bet every 3-4 seconds.

Pokies also have distinctive and common sounds built into them to trigger cravings for gambling and are programmed so that any bet can win on a pre-determined probability and return rate.

Psychologists know this as a variable response schedule and have established that this leads to high rates of responding. Also responding in this way has been shown to quickly establish new behaviour patterns of a lasting nature.

3. How do I win?

The easy answer is to own the machines or be the house (i.e. own a casino), though there are strict regulations in NZ on who can provide gambling services and how.

Other than this it is possible to increase the chances of winning on some forms of gambling that are not completely random by thoroughly researching the form of the players. Sports betting, track betting and the share market fall into these categories; however the following rules need to be followed to make this work:

1. Be completely unemotional in making bets.
2. Only bet with 'play money;' that is money you can afford to lose.

4. If I have a gambling problem, do I have to stop gambling completely?

You are an adult and you don't have to do anything. However, you probably wouldn't be reading this unless gambling was a problem for you or someone you know. To get this problem under control you may well have to stop the kind or kinds of gambling that are problematic.

A lot of gamblers find it easiest to either completely or almost completely stop gambling at least for several months. This is an extreme level of control but is often essential in overcoming a problem with pokies (EGMs) in particular. However many people control their gambling by rigidly applying some rules, for example:

- Time rules.

These might be rules about the frequency of gambling e. g. not more than once a month; for no more than 30 minutes; etc.

- Mood rules.

Never gamble as a reward, as a way of getting away from problems or to improve mood.

- Social rules.

Never gamble alone or with people who don't know about your gambling problem and who are not supportive in helping you with your gambling.

- Money rules.

Be strict about how much you will spend. When making money rules, you must be clear that limiting gambling to an amount e.g. \$50.00 means that you won't know how long you will be gambling. For example on a pokie machine \$50.00 could keep you going for anything from 10 minutes to 2 hours. If it only lasts 10 minutes will you want to break the rule and put in more money?

5. If I have stolen money for gambling because of an addiction, is it still a crime?

Yes. In one way or another most problem gamblers end up stealing. Often not illegally but by stealing from their family, children or by taking money that was budgeted to go onto bills.

Many gamblers also end up stealing from the government through either tax or benefit fraud and some gamblers steal from employers.

6. Do I tell a lot of lies because of my gambling or because it is a mental disease?

Unfortunately lying and gambling go together and most family members (partners, children) are affected by someone else's gambling. Reports indicate that the lying does more damage to relationships than the loss of money.

The lying people with gambling problems do is not usually because of a mental disorder. However some people have a lifetime pattern of pathological lying. These people are likely to have a personality disorder and need professional help.

Usually a problem gambler's lying is caused by their own inability to understand their addiction and a need to make sense to themselves and others about something they feel completely confused about.

There are other factors in this including:

- A fear that if the truth is known there will be curbs put on their ability to gamble by others who are checking up on them.
- The consequences of the truth about their gambling may be far reaching and something they wish to avoid eg loss of a relationship or job
- The changed mental and physical state problem gamblers get into when contemplating gambling and when gambling. This makes them lose contact with time and their normal moral controls.
- The craving for gambling that becomes overpowering.
- Guilt over gambling, gambling losses and the effects of this on the family.

7. Is there an association between mental disease and gambling?

There are some mental illnesses that are associated with problem gambling and gambling can also cause some mental illnesses.

People with Bipolar disorder (once called manic depressive disorder) may gamble either in the hypomanic or manic phase of their illness when all sorts of risky behaviours are more probable or in the depressed phase as a way of improving mood or escaping from their low mood.

Some people with Personality disorders are likely to gamble, more particularly clients with Narcissistic Personality disorders or Anti-social Personality disorders.

These disorders need to be diagnosed by a mental health professional and the treatment of problem gambling for clients with disorders will require specialist services.

- Gambling can cause mental illnesses.

A high proportion of problem gambling clients will experience depression either immediately after gambling or as a chronic condition that may either predate or be set off by problem gambling. There are neurological explanations for this that centre on the depletion of a neurotransmitter called dopamine through gambling.

Around 15 – 20% of problem gamblers will be helped by medication to break the gambling/depression cycle; however, most problem gamblers do not need medication.

8. What causes problem gambling – Is it nature or nurture?

There have been debates about the roles of nature or nurture/upbringing in the development of problem gambling. The current state of knowledge suggests that Nature, Nurture and Exposure all play a role in determining who will develop gambling problems.

- Nature

Problem gambling like opioid and alcohol addictions is a Mu receptor addiction. The Mu receptor is a molecule on neurones in a particular area of the brain stem. Simply some people are born with more of these receptors and gambling will be a more rewarding activity to these people. This increases the vulnerability to developing gambling problems.

- Nurture

Upbringing can affect vulnerability to developing problem gambling. Deprivation in the child's early years, possibly even before birth can sensitise the person to the comfort experienced when gambling activates their brain's reward pathways. This makes gambling a more rewarding activity for these individuals and so increases their vulnerability to developing problem gambling.

- Exposure

There are two aspects to exposure. As with most potentially addictive activities or substances, if an individual indulges for long enough they will become first habitual and then addictive. However, exposure at times when the individual is emotionally vulnerable dramatically increases the risk that recreational gambling will develop into problem gambling. Being brought up in an environment where gambling is common can lead to it being seen as a normal part of life thus placing the individual in a position where they are likely to indulge on a regular basis and often from an early age.

9. Can medications from a Doctor cause problem gambling?

Yes. The best examples of this are some medications prescribed to treat Parkinson's disease. A known side effect of these medications is the development of problem gambling. If you have concerns about this check this out with your treating physician.

10. Really, how successful am I likely to be in getting control over my gambling?

The Gambling Helpline has followed up people with gambling problems who have presented to their service. These people have used a variety of ways of dealing with their problem gambling from total abstinence to control. They have also used helping resources such as telephone counselling, face-to-face counselling and sometimes medications.

Following these people indicates that a large proportion of people who use treatment services are successful in meeting their treatment goals.

11. Is there a pill that can cure problem gambling?

There is. Naltrexone a Mu receptor antagonist is an efficacious treatment for problem gambling. Like any medication it can have side effects and is not tolerated by all clients. Also in NZ Naltrexone is not subsidised by the government, so clients have to meet the full cost of the medication (about \$12 per day).

Naltrexone is a useful medication for some gambling clients. However, the vast majority of problem gamblers are successful in controlling their gambling without medication.