

Older adults and gambling



Gambling, or playing a game of chance for money or other stakes, has become a popular activity for people of many ages – and seniors are no exception. While experts agree that most adults can gamble without a problem, prevalence studies conducted in Oregon find that 2.7 percent of the general population¹ and 1.2 percent of the older adult population become problem or pathological gamblers².

Gambling opportunities for Oregonians are plentiful. Tribal casinos, Lottery products, sports betting and Internet gambling are more available than ever. The increase in the number of people with gambling problems corresponds to the increase in availability of gambling opportunities. Studies estimate that more than 6,000 Oregonians age 62 years or older currently have a gambling problem.

Concerns about older adults and problem gambling

Older adults' gambling differs from younger age groups because:

- ⌘ People coping with big changes or losses are more vulnerable to developing gambling problems; many older adults face life transitions and losses (deaths, retirement, illness, isolation).
- ⌘ Older adults who have gambled away their retirement savings don't have working years to make up their losses.
- ⌘ Many older adults may not understand addiction, making them less likely to identify a gambling problem.
- ⌘ Older adults appear less willing to seek assistance for a gambling problem than younger adults.

1 Volberg, R. (2001, February). Changes in gambling and problem gambling In Oregon: results from a replication study, 1997-2000. Salem, OR: Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation.

2 Moore, T. (2001, April). Older adult gambling in Oregon: an epidemiological survey. Salem, OR: Oregon Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation.

- ⌘ Many older adults hide their gambling because of the stigma associated with it and health professionals rarely assess for problem gambling.
- ⌘ Many older adults have easy access to gambling and are drawn to gambling to fill their time or to be with other people.
- ⌘ A larger proportion of older adults, compared to younger adults, have cognitive impairment, which may interfere with their ability to make sound decisions.

Problem gambling – signs and symptoms

Problem gambling is a term that indicates a person's gambling compromises or damages his or her personal, family, or vocational pursuits. Below are some of the more common signs and symptoms of problem gambling:

- ⌘ Gambling to calm nerves, forget worries, or reduce depression;
- ⌘ Losing interest in other things, such as food;
- ⌘ Talking about, thinking about, or planning to gamble and not doing other activities;
- ⌘ Lying about gambling habits;
- ⌘ Gambling alone or gambling more often;
- ⌘ Getting into arguments about gambling;
- ⌘ Going without basic needs in order to gamble;
- ⌘ Needing to gamble more and more money in order to get the desired effect;
- ⌘ Health problems related to gambling, such as headaches, irritable bowel, anxiety and depression;
- ⌘ Having financial problems caused by gambling.

Getting help

In Oregon, treatment for problem gambling is free. Treatment options include telephone counseling, in-person individual counseling, and group counseling.

Call the confidential, 24-hour phone number below for information or help at no cost:

877-MYLIMIT or go to 1877mylimit.org

Free seniors brochure download: 1877mylimit.org – click on Resources

Problem gambling and older adults

⌘ The rate of problem gambling among Oregonian adults ages 65 and older is 1.2 percent, lower than any other age group in Oregon (Moore, 2001b); however, older adults who play at gambling facilities are six times more likely to be problem gamblers than other older adults randomly chosen from the same community, and 3.7 times as likely to be probable pathological gamblers (McNeilly & Burke, 2000).

⌘ Older adults are considered at increased risk due to factors such as loneliness, isolation, and physical or mental illness that are often more common to that population than among other age groups; additionally, in one study of older adults, the most likely reported motivations to gamble were: relaxation, boredom, passing time, and getting away for the day (McNeilly & Burke, 2000).

⌘ Compared to those older adults surveyed from senior centers, older adults surveyed from bingo events had higher South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) scores and greater gambling frequency and expenditures (Ladd, Molina, Kerins, & Petry, 2003).

⌘ Among adults over 65 years of age, gambling is the most frequently identified social activity (McNeilly & Burke, 2001).

⌘ From 1975 to 1997, the number of American adults 65 years of age or older that had ever gambled increased by 45 percent (NORC, 1999).

⌘ From 1994 to 1998, the percentage of women 65 years of age or older who had ever gambled rose by 20 percent (NORC, 1999).

⌘ Some older adults may have cognitive impairment that interferes with their ability to make sound decisions.

⌘ Many older adults may not understand addiction, making them less likely to identify a gambling problem; additionally, older adults appear less willing to seek assistance for a gambling problem than younger adults.

⌘ There is also concern that gambling-related problems may be more difficult to identify because of increased isolation from co-workers, friends and family.

Did You Know...?

Among adults over 65 years of age, gambling is the most frequently identified social activity.