

# MOOD DISORDERS & GAMBLING

A recent study by the MDSC and CANMAT confirms a greater risk for people with mood disorders who gamble becoming a problem or pathological gambler.



## If you like to gamble, you may be risking more than just money

Over the last decade, legalized gambling in Canada has grown rapidly and so has problem gambling. We are only just beginning to understand its public health and economic impact. Government-directed gambling alone has increased four-fold. Marketing and advertisement is widespread and there are now over 100,000 places to make a legal bet in Canada. New technological advances in the gaming industry are leading to forms of gambling that are highly addictive (i.e. Video Lottery Terminals and Online Texas Hold'em Poker). What was once considered an illegal activity and thought by many to be socially unacceptable has become a popular form of entertainment.

The potential risks of gambling are generally not well understood by the public. According to the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey, approximately 1.2 million or one in every twenty adult Canadians are at risk of becoming "problem gamblers". Recent research tells us that there is also a very high rate of mood, anxiety and substance abuse problems among problem gamblers. We also know that when mood disorders, problem gambling and/or substance abuse combine there is a greater degree of harm

experienced physically, emotionally, economically and socially by the gambler and their family including a heightened risk for suicide.

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada was unsure if people with depression, bipolar and anxiety disorders may be a unique 'high-risk' group for gambling problems. If so, then they need information to understand and manage this risk. Patients seeking medical help are rarely asked about the role gambling may play in their lives and most people are reluctant to share this information with their doctor. There are no obvious physical signs like slurred speech that help spot a problem. As a consequence, problem gambling goes undetected and untreated. If people with a mood disorder do develop a gambling problem then they will need a specific approach to treatment.

### A Unique Partnership

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada (MDSC) and Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatment (CANMAT) was funded by the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre to research the

frequency of problem gambling amongst people who seek treatment for a mood disorder. This study looked to see if having a mood disorder came before a gambling problem. Is a mood disorder the result of gambling problems - or both? We wanted to better understand what factors may increase risk and how gambling behaviours effect quality of life. Were there differences between men and women, or differences related to age, income, education and ethnicity in the rates of mood disorders and problem gambling behaviours? The study also looked at anxiety and how personality may be connected to gambling behaviour in both mood disordered and bipolar patients.

### How was the study done?

Researchers from across Canada (5 sites) and the USA (1 site) asked 606 adults, who were diagnosed as having a major depressive or bipolar disorder, to participate with 579 members of a control group to complete the study. During a single visit, they were interviewed and asked to complete a number of standardized research assessment tools to measure their level of depression, mania, anxiety, risk for suicide

and alcohol and substance abuse. The presence, severity and timing of gambling problems was also assessed along with quality of life and personality factors.

### What did the study find?

- The study found there is more than twice the rate of problem gambling in people seeking help for major depressive and bipolar disorders when compared to the Canadian average. People with mood disorders were two and a half times more likely to become pathological gamblers.

- More than 70% of problem gamblers reported that their mood disorder (major depressive or bipolar disorders) came *before* their gambling problem.

- Those with gambling problems reported high rates of anxiety disorders (panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorders) and had higher rates of suicidal thinking.

- Drug and alcohol dependency appears to be a serious risk factor for people with a mood disorder who gamble.

- The presence of a gambling problem was linked with higher levels of clinically-rated depression and poorer quality of life.
- Problem and pathological gamblers, with a mood disorder, were found to have significantly higher rates of other psychiatric disorders. They are more than twice as likely to think about suicide.
- As gambling levels increased so did the intensity of both depression and manic symptoms.
- Those with problem gambling in the last year were more likely to have a lower education level. Those with a high school diploma had a problem gambling rate of 30%. Over a lifetime, problem and pathological gamblers showed no difference in education.
- No difference was found in the rates of problem gambling based on income, employment or marital status.
- Problem gambling levels were higher among non-Caucasian ethnic groups.
- The gambling rates were the same across all six sites. However, availability of gambling opportunities in casinos and video lottery terminals seems to matter with more problem gambling being found in Ottawa, Toronto (casinos) and Edmonton (video lottery terminals).
- Women reported symptoms of depression causing problems in their lives at a younger age. They were also more likely to seek help at a younger age.
- Men with bipolar disorder were twice as likely to bet more than they could really afford, gambling larger amounts of money in order to get the same feeling of excitement, and started gambling at an earlier age than females. They also felt guilty about the way they gambled and were more likely to recognized they had a problem with gambling.
- Those who reported their gambling problem came before their mood disorder were more likely to report higher rates of anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorders and phobias as well as current and life time alcohol and substance dependence. This was slightly more pronounced for people with bipolar disorder.

### What are the implications of this study?

It is clear from this study that people with a mood disorder should take great care in their gambling behaviour or risk developing serious problems. If

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# Keep your gambling in control

## Play it safe - know the risks

they do choose to gamble it will be important to avoid drugs and alcohol and not use gambling as a way of dealing with feelings of anxiety, depression, impulsivity or boredom.

Health and mental health care providers must take steps to assess gambling behaviours in patients who present for treatment of depression, bipolar or anxiety disorders to determine if gambling is playing a contributing role in their mood disorder. This is particularly true for young men, people with bipolar disorders and where there is substance abuse and dependency.

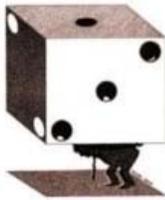
Educating the public about the effects of gambling on individual gamblers, their families, and communities will help promote the idea that gambling is an important health concern.

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada and health care providers have an important role in educating policy planners on the significant health and safety costs associated with gambling.

*A full copy of the research report is available on the Mood Disorders Society of Canada website.  
<http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca>*

### What makes people vulnerable to gambling problems?

- Mistaken beliefs about the odds of winning at gambling.
  - A 'big win' early in the person's gambling history.
  - A personal history of drug, alcohol, gambling, or overspending problems.
  - A family history of drug, alcohol, gambling, or overspending problems.
  - A history of mental health problems, particularly depression, stress, or trauma.
  - Loneliness, chronic boredom, or lack of leisure activities.
  - A habit of using gambling or substances to cope with negative feelings or events.
  - A tendency toward impulsive behavior.
- Financial problems.



### Getting help

If you, or someone you care about, are having problems with their gambling - get help! Across Canada there are free, private and confidential services available to help you sort out what is going on and link you to the information, support or treatment you need.

Visit the Mood Disorders Society of Canada website  
<http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca>

### What is harmful gambling?

- Losing track of time and spending more hours in play than you intended.
- Spending more money than you planned or can afford to lose.
- Ignoring work and family responsibilities because of gambling.
- Borrowing money or using household expense money to gamble.
- "Chasing your losses" in an attempt to win back your money.
- Seeing gambling as a way to 'earn' money.
- Believing that your 'investment' will eventually pay off.
- Gambling is the most important activity in your life over all other interests.
- Using gambling to cope with your problems or avoid things.
- Your gambling is causing conflicts within your family and friendships.
- Letting your health suffer.