

## GAMBLING AND DISORDERED GAMBLING FACTS: OLDER ADULTS

Founded in 1983, the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling is a private, non-profit health agency dedicated to providing leadership to reduce the social, financial, and emotional costs of problem gambling, and to promote a continuum of prevention and intervention strategies including: information and public awareness, community education and professional training, advocacy and referral services for problem gamblers, their loved ones and the greater community.

**TERMS:** There are a number of terms used to define gambling and gambling disorders.

- **Gambling:** Activities in which something of value is risked on the outcome of an event when the probability of winning or losing is less than certain.<sup>1</sup>
- **Pathological gambling:** *The American Psychiatric Association* classifies pathological gambling as an impulse control disorder and defines it as the “persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior that disrupts personal, family or vocational pursuits” (p. 615).<sup>2</sup> **Compulsive gambling** is the original lay term for pathological gambling.<sup>3</sup>
- **Sub-clinical pathological gambling (i.e., problem gambling):** Gambling behavior that does not necessarily meet the criteria for pathological gambling but results in harmful effects to a gambler, his or her family, significant others, friends, co-workers, and others.<sup>3</sup>
- **Disordered gambling:** A term used to describe the combination of pathological and sub-clinical pathological gambling.<sup>3</sup>

**OLDER ADULT GAMBLING PREVALENCE RATES:** Studies have estimated the percentage of older adults who gamble as well as the number who have problems because of their gambling.

- **Gambling rates:** Approximately 50.3% of U.S. adults over the age of 65 gambled in the past year.<sup>4</sup>
- **Recreational gambling rates:** Approximately 28.7% of U.S. adults over the age of 65 gamble recreationally (i.e., they gamble  $\geq 5$  times in a year).<sup>5</sup>
  - Males 37%
  - Females 23%
- **Past year problem/pathological gambling rates:** Less than 1.0% (0.3) of U.S. adults over the age of 65 have experienced problem or pathological gambling in the past year.<sup>5</sup>
  - Males 0.3%
  - Females 0.2%
- **Lifetime problem/pathological gambling rates:** Less than 1.0% (0.85) of U.S. adults over the age of 60 have experienced problem or pathological gambling in their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

### RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RECREATIONAL GAMBLING, SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROBLEMS AND MENTAL HEALTH

**DISORDERS:** Among older adults, those who gamble recreationally (i.e., less than 5 times in a year) are significantly more likely than their counterparts who have not gambled recreationally to also have mental health disorders and/or substance abuse problems.

- **Substance abuse problems:** compared to older adults who do not gamble recreationally (i.e., they gamble less than 5 times in a year), older adult recreational gamblers are more likely to have the following substance abuse problems:
  - Nicotine dependence (17.0%)<sup>5, 6</sup>
  - Alcohol use disorder (30.1%)<sup>5, 6</sup>
- **Mental health disorders:** compared to older adults who do not gamble recreationally (i.e., they gamble less than 5 times in a year), older adult recreational gamblers are more likely to have the following mental health disorders:
  - A mood disorder (e.g., depression, bi-polar; 12.7%)
  - An anxiety disorder (e.g., phobia, social phobia, generalized anxiety; 15.0%)
  - A personality disorder (e.g., antisocial, schizoid, obsessive-compulsive; 11.3%)<sup>6</sup>

**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PROBLEM/PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS AND POOR HEALTH OUTCOMES:** Among older adults, those who have experienced gambling problems are significantly more likely than their counterparts who have not experienced gambling problems to also have mental disorders, substance abuse problems and/or poor health outcomes.

- **Substance abuse problems:** compared to older adults who do not gamble or gamble but are not disordered gamblers, older adult disordered gamblers are more likely to have the following substance abuse problems:
  - Nicotine dependence (43.2%)<sup>5, 6</sup>
  - Alcohol/abuse dependence (53.2%)<sup>5, 6</sup>
  - Non-alcohol drug disorder (4.6%)<sup>6</sup>
- **Mental health disorders:** compared to older adults who do not gamble or gamble but are not disordered gamblers, older adult disordered gamblers are more likely to have the following mental health disorders:
  - A mood disorder (e.g., depression, bi-polar; 39.5%)
  - An anxiety disorder (e.g., phobia, social phobia, generalized anxiety; 34.5%)
  - A personality disorder (e.g., antisocial, schizoid, obsessive-compulsive; 43.0%)<sup>6</sup>
- **Poor health outcomes:** compared to older adults who do not gamble or gamble but are not problem/pathological gamblers, older adult problem/pathological gamblers are more likely to have the following poor health outcomes:
  - Obesity
  - Worse overall physical health<sup>5</sup>

**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RECREATIONAL GAMBLING AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS:** Although research has shown recreational and problem/pathological gambling are associated with other health-related problems, research also has shown that gambling is associated with numerous positive measures among older adults.

- Compared to older adults who did not gamble during the past year, older adult gamblers reported:
  - Better social support (e.g., someone to talk to about problems)<sup>7</sup>
  - Lower levels of depression<sup>7</sup>
  - Higher self-rated health<sup>4, 5, 7</sup>
  - Higher cognitive functioning<sup>5, 7</sup>

#### **HELP FOR THOSE WITH GAMBLING PROBLEMS:**

Help for people experiencing problems with gambling, their family members, and the greater community is available:

- The Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling operates a free, confidential Helpline (800-426-1234) and website: [www.masscompulsivegambling.org](http://www.masscompulsivegambling.org). In addition, the Mass. Council trains clinicians and maintains a list of professionals who have earned their Massachusetts Problem Gambling Specialist Certificate (MAPGS).
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health funds treatment centers throughout the state.
- Many people experiencing problems with gambling join Gamblers Anonymous (GA) or Bettors Anonymous (BA).
- Spouses, significant others, and family members of people experiencing problems with gambling can attend Gam-Anon, a fellowship that meets to share experiences about living with a disordered gambler.

For more information or to have a packet of materials sent to you, please visit [www.masscompulsivegambling.org](http://www.masscompulsivegambling.org), call the Mass. Council Helpline (800-426-1234), the business line (617-426-4554), e-mail the Council at [gambling@aol.com](mailto:gambling@aol.com), or visit 190 High Street, Suite 5, Boston, MA 02110-3031.

## REFERENCES CITED: OLDER ADULT POPULATION FACT SHEET

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