



Does alcohol misuse and problem gambling go hand in hand?

Behaviour such as gambling often does not exist alone. There are certain lifestyle activities that often co-occur and cluster such as drinking, gambling, and smoking. Alcohol may be used to cope with depression or anxiety caused by gambling problems, which may then trigger gambling desire.

The parallel between alcohol use disorder (AUD) and problem gambling is very close. Something which in moderation is enjoyable and relatively harmless when

engaged in by most people, for some people becomes excessive. A 2005 study found that 73% of problem gamblers had an alcohol disorder and 60% had a nicotine dependence.¹

The question is does problem gambling promote AUD or is it the other way around? Does drinking increase the risk of heavier and longer gambling sessions? Is increased alcohol consumption a response to the problems caused by excessive gambling?

Definitions

Problem gambling: Is an urge to gamble despite harmful negative consequences or a desire to stop.

Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), alcohol misuse or alcohol dependence: It is characterised by compulsive and uncontrolled consumption of alcohol despite its negative effects on the drinker's health and social standing.

General characteristics of both: Intense desire to satisfy a need, a loss of control, compulsive thoughts and engaging in the behaviour despite negative consequences.

Background studies

Alcohol related harm is directly associated with outlet density. Similarly, an increase in the number of pokie machines per capita results in an increased prevalence of problem gambling.²

In New Zealand pokie venues are predominately sited within 8-10 (56%) socio-economically deprived areas. Under the Gambling Act 2003 the primary function of a (pokie) class 4 venue must not be for gambling. For most venues the sale of liquor is the primary function.

Along with a rise in loan shark outlets and gambling venues has been a huge increase in liquor outlets in low income areas. The more widely available alcohol is in a community, the more it will be consumed. With more outlets competition drives prices lower, and the lower cost tends to drive consumption higher.³

A 2004 New Zealand study which examined the proliferation of alcohol, gambling and fast food outlets in the Bay of Plenty and Lakes Region concluded that high concentrations increased social acceptance, use and harm and posed a risk to community wellbeing. Their analysis found a direct relationship between the density of liquor, gambling and fast food outlets and deprivation.⁴

The commonality between problem gambling and alcohol use may increase the risk of both conditions. To date little empirical research has been done on this. However, a study in 2001 found that alcohol dependence was 23 times more likely amongst those with problem gambling than the general population.⁵ The study also found that among those with a higher socio-economic status alcohol dependence and problem gambling were even more strongly correlated.

A US study in 1998 found that 44% of problem gamblers also had a lifetime history of AUD and as the problem gambling severity increased so did the AUD risk.⁶ In New Zealand 35% of those receiving treatment for problem gambling had current and harmful alcohol use.⁷

The correlation between alcohol misuse, problem gambling and suicidal intent was examined among suicidal patients at an A&E Department in Auckland using the Eight Gambling Screen, a CAGE alcohol screen and the Beck Suicidal Intent Scale.⁸ Of the patients examined 17% screened positive on the Eight Gambling Screen (one in six) and 75% positive on the CAGE alcohol screen. Within the gambling group 83% predominately used pokie machines. It also found that problem gambling patients who had attempted suicide were more likely to be Maori.

- The consumption of alcohol can influence gambling choices making it more likely to initiate gambling and to increase the amount wagered in a particular gambling session.⁵
- Alcohol consumption may also inhibit the evaluation of the costs and benefits of gambling, impair the ability to understand the rules of the game, and lead to overconfidence in one's ability to win.⁵
- Alcohol consumption has been positively associated with the likelihood of experiencing gambling-related problems, and with the number of problems experienced, and it was found that these problems increased as the level of drinking increased.⁵



Key points

- Intoxication often facilitates heavier gambling
- Increased alcohol may also be a response to the problems created by excessive gambling
- Both are related to stress, or are behaviours indicative of non conformity to the norms of moderation ⁹
- Gamblers tend to think about alcohol more when they are winning ¹⁰
- People with concurrent problem gambling and AUDs have more suicidal tendencies than people with problem gambling alone ¹⁰
- Gamblers who simultaneously tackle both disorders seem to have the best outcomes ¹⁰
- Children of problem gamblers are at a higher risk of developing health threatening behaviors, including alcohol and drug abuse, problem gambling, eating disorders, depression, and suicide ¹¹
- 74% of regular pokie players drank while gambling ¹²
- Collaboration between treatment services for co-morbid conditions should contribute to improved access to services, and ensure interventions happen early to prevent clients in crisis ¹³
- Treatment of comorbidities should be integrated into problem gambling treatment programmes ¹³
- Comorbidity affects treatment seeking, the treatment process, and its outcome, as the presence of certain comorbidities is a significant predictor of treatment dropout ¹³
- Drinking norms and the amount of alcohol consumed have been found to be associated with neighbourhood-level alcohol outlet density, ¹⁴ and tobacco outlet density is related to adolescent smoking by increasing environmental cues to smoke ¹⁵
- Councils can play a crucial role in encouraging a change in the drinking and gambling culture with the planning of alcohol and gambling outlets in their communities
- As with problem gamblers (who affect up to seventeen others) alcohol consumption also has significant negative effects not only on drinkers but also on people around the drinker



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**Problem Gambling Foundation Freephone
0800 664 262**

Produced by the Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand,
P.O. Box 8021, Symonds Street, Auckland.
Phone 368 1520

www.pgfnz.org.nz / www.pgfnz.org.nz/library