



Older adults and problem gambling

A new retirement problem?

For a significant number of adults over the age of 65 years gambling has become a form of recreation and entertainment. Gambling venues with poker machines, whether in casinos, local clubs or bars, have become very accessible within most regions of New Zealand.

In the past gambling was traditionally the realm of males, with TAB and sports betting as primary modes. However, in New Zealand during 2004, the number of women problem gamblers seeking help equaled men¹. Women were playing the 'pokies' in large numbers. With increasing chronological age there was a shift in gambling mode from sports and bingo to more expensive gaming at casinos and with poker machines.

Although New Zealand statistics report that there was only a small number of older gamblers (5.9% 60+ years)¹ anecdotal evidence showed that there was a growing number of older adults gambling. Overseas studies claim as many as 7.8–16.5%² of older adults have gambling problems.

Motivations for gambling were found to be relaxation, boredom, passing the time, cheap meals, meeting new friends, free transportation, have fun and excitement, and getting out for the day.

For most of this group gambling was a leisure activity while for others gambling was no longer just for fun, it had become a problem and a major financial burden. The solution to loneliness and boredom had become a problem.

Older adult problem gamblers often feel Inadequate, unloved and unimportant.

Older adults need to feel productive, competent, and worthwhile through participation and a well balanced lifestyle.

They need to feel challenged and have the capacity to have fun while being involved in hobbies, leisure activities and in continued learning.

Inactivity after a productive working life breeds behaviour changes such as escape or avoidance which can lead to excessive gambling.

Most older adults are social

gamblers and gamble with funds that they can afford to lose and set limits on their gambling. A small percentage don't and gambling becomes a problem as they quickly use up their financial reserves and then are unable to meet their living expenses.

Their life savings become depleted, as many are on fixed incomes. They can never earn that money again.

It has been suggested that unresolved grief, anxiety, depression and anger maybe a

powerful motivator for gambling. Escape from life stressors such as the death of a spouse, a change in residence, marital separation, disagreements with family or friends and financial difficulties can drive some towards gambling.

A recent Canadian study found that the primary motivation for gambling in older adults was mainly for a pleasurable social activity, then the food provided and thirdly the gambling action.³

1. Ministry of Health. (2008) Problem gambling intervention services in New Zealand. 2006 service-user statistics. Wellington: MOH.
2. D McNeilly & WJ Burke. (2000) Late life gambling: the attitudes and behaviors of older adults, *Journal of Gambling Studies* 16 (4): 393-415.
3. Gary Nixon et al. (2005) 'Double trouble': the lived experience of problem and pathological gambling in later life. *Journal of Gambling Issues* 14: 1-21
4. Helen Kimberley (2005) *The perils of pokies. Research into the information needs of older women and their families*. Melbourne: WIRE Women's Information.
5. Pamela Hirsch (2000) *Seniors and gambling: exploring the issues. Summary report*. Alberta: Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission..

“All gambling problems [with older women] have been EGM related. No interviewee has had a previous problem with gambling in any form before she began to “play the pokies”. 3

Casino tours from rest homes are increasingly marketed by the industry. Groups are driven to a gaming venue and are often offered free or cheap meals and drinks. Casinos and gaming venues offer an exciting noisy environment for older adults. An environment where any age fits in and you can either socialise or play on your own.

I don't go there [the casino] to meet people; I don't go there because I know somebody there that's gambling. I don't do that. I just go there, just sit in a corner, just leave me alone, just don't talk to me. I want to be by myself.

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Older adult women

Older women were found to gamble as a way of escaping the tradition roles or caring and sacrifice to others that they had endured all their lives. 4

For example, P.M. spoke of her gambling this way: “When you're here (gambling) ... you're more or less on your own and nobody can control you - we always helped our kids a lot, so I didn't feel like I should just scrimp and save any more!” Another woman, T.L., described her gambling as a welcome relief from years of having to commit to her family: “I raised a family all by myself, done all these things ... I've had to follow all these rules and I've had to commit

myself, always, always, always, I'm not doing it any more, I am retired.” Similarly, M.M. acknowledged, “You don't do it every day, but you do it occasionally, and I have to admit that it is fun to stay up until three ... and be bad for change!”

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Older adults can pose a greater threat than younger problem gamblers as they have a reluctance to seek help for their gambling, and

they also have less time to recover from the psychological, social and financial impact of their gambling. More than half of older adults indicated that they did not know who to call or where to go for information about problem gambling.⁵

Older adults state that family and friends invite them gambling and have a strong influence on the amount they spend.⁵

I don't have very many more years to sock a little bit away, ah, you know, then, I get quite mad at myself and then I'll stay away for quite awhile, and then I'll say 'I've been good,' and before I know it, I'll be back

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Interventions

- Information through public education campaigns/programmes to show how gambling can become a problem and where help can be sought.
- Empowerment - making older adults feel an important part of the community.
- The replacement of casino visits as a social activity, send the vans to other venues like the beach or the movies, or hobby groups.
- Encourage help seeking and use of counselling services.
- On an individual level going for a walk instead or visiting family.
- Encourage the formation of support groups and social action groups to work together to eliminate gambling.
- Encourage volunteer work

Problem Gambling Foundation Hotline

0800 664 262