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Diseases & Conditions

# Compulsive gambling

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## Overview

Compulsive gambling, also called gambling disorder, is the uncontrollable urge to keep gambling despite the toll it takes on your life. Gambling means that you're willing to risk something you value in the hope of getting something of even greater value.

Gambling can stimulate the brain's reward system much like drugs or alcohol can, leading to addiction. If you have a problem with compulsive gambling, you may continually chase bets that lead to losses, use up savings and create debt. You may hide your behavior and even turn to theft or fraud to support your addiction.

Compulsive gambling is a serious condition that can destroy lives. Although treating compulsive gambling can be challenging, many people who struggle with compulsive gambling have found help through professional treatment.

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# **Symptoms**

Signs and symptoms of compulsive gambling (gambling disorder) can include:

- Being preoccupied with gambling, such as constantly planning gambling activities and how to get more gambling money
- Needing to gamble with increasing amounts of money to get the same thrill
- Trying to control, cut back or stop gambling, without success
- Feeling restless or irritable when you try to cut down on gambling
- Gambling to escape problems or relieve feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression

- Trying to get back lost money by gambling more (chasing losses)
- Lying to family members or others to hide the extent of your gambling
- Risking or losing important relationships, a job, or school or work opportunities because of gambling
- Asking others to bail you out of financial trouble because you gambled money away

Most casual gamblers stop when losing or set a limit on how much they're willing to lose. But people with a compulsive gambling problem are compelled to keep playing to recover their money — a pattern that becomes increasingly destructive over time. Some people may turn to theft or fraud to get gambling money.

Some people with a compulsive gambling problem may have periods of remission — a length of time where they gamble less or not at all. But without treatment, the remission usually isn't permanent.

### **When to see a doctor or mental health professional**

Have family members, friends or co-workers expressed concern about your gambling? If so, listen to their worries. Because denial is almost always a feature of compulsive or addictive behavior, it may be difficult for you to realize that you have a problem.

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## **Causes**

Exactly what causes someone to gamble compulsively isn't well understood. Like many problems, compulsive gambling may result from a combination of biological, genetic and environmental factors.

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# Risk factors

Although most people who play cards or wager never develop a gambling problem, certain factors are more often associated with compulsive gambling:

- **Mental health issues.** People who gamble compulsively often have substance misuse problems, personality disorders, depression or anxiety. Compulsive gambling may also be associated with bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- **Age.** Compulsive gambling is more common in younger and middle-aged people. Gambling during childhood or the teenage years increases the risk of developing compulsive gambling. But compulsive gambling in the older adult population can also be a problem.
- **Sex.** Compulsive gambling is more common in men than women. Women who gamble typically start later in life and may become addicted more quickly. But gambling patterns among men and women have become increasingly similar.
- **Family or friend influence.** If your family members or friends have a gambling problem, the chances are greater that you will, too.
- **Medications used to treat Parkinson's disease and restless legs syndrome.** Drugs called dopamine agonists have a rare side effect that may result in compulsive behaviors, including gambling, in some people.
- **Certain personality characteristics.** Being highly competitive, a workaholic, impulsive, restless or easily bored may increase your risk of compulsive gambling.

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## Complications

Compulsive gambling can have profound and long-lasting consequences for your life, such as:

- Relationship problems

- Financial problems, including bankruptcy
  - Legal problems or imprisonment
  - Poor work performance or job loss
  - Poor general health
  - Suicide, suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts
- 

## Prevention

Although there's no proven way to prevent a gambling problem, educational programs that target individuals and groups at increased risk may be helpful.

If you have risk factors for compulsive gambling, consider avoiding gambling in any form, people who gamble and places where gambling occurs. Get treatment at the earliest sign of a problem to help prevent gambling from becoming worse.

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By Mayo Clinic Staff

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