

In it to win it? Researcher recommends extended treatment regimen for gambling addicts

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Pathological gambling addiction is surprisingly common in the U.S., afflicting as many as 3.4% of all adults. Like other addictions, it is highly disabling both to the individual and to society, often leading to suicide, job loss, and criminal behavior. It affects more men than women and can become worse over time.

Scientists have found that a wide range of drugs can be effective for treating this disorder in the short term, including Naltrexone, used to treat [alcohol addiction](#). Now, psychiatrist Prof. Pinhas Dannon of Tel Aviv University's Sackler Faculty of Medicine is recommending an extended [treatment regimen](#) for optimal results.

For best success in kicking the gambling habit, Prof. Dannon says, drug therapy with Naltrexone should last for at least two years and be complemented with other treatments, including group therapy. Prof. Dannon presented preliminary results from his new clinical findings at the EPA 2011: 19th European Congress of Psychiatry this March.

Two years to stick

Earlier studies reported that after six months of treatment, a majority of the gamblers would not go back to gambling. Prof. Dannon believes that a longer course of treatment is more effective.

"The initial results were too optimistic," Prof. Dannon says. His data indicates that a drug regimen lasting two years keeps 80 percent of gamblers "gamble-free" over a four-year period. By contrast, only 30 percent of gamblers who were treated over a six-month period remained gamble-free four years later.

The preliminary study, conducted in 2006 and 2007, was encouraging, Prof. Dannon says, but for long-term effectiveness gambling addicts need to stick out a course of treatment for at least two years in order for [Naltrexone](#) to work most efficiently.

A holistic approach

Complementary treatments such as group therapy and regular attendance at Gamblers' Anonymous meetings can also help the addict lead a healthier, gambling-free life.

During his career Prof. Dannon has also conducted extensive research on other kinds of addiction, including Internet addiction. One of his recent patients was addicted to the Facebook game Farmville, neglecting her two young children to play it. While Facebook poker and Farmville can be addictive, these obsessions can be treated differently than those of hard-core gamblers who risk their marriages, houses and careers. For milder addictions, group therapy and professional counselling might be all the help that's needed.

"[Gambling addiction](#) is a chronic disorder," Prof Dannon concludes.

"We need much more time to treat these patients. They require careful monitoring and holistic treatments over the longer term to avoid relapse."

Prof. Dannon has just authored a seminal book on behavioral addictions, *Are We All Addicts?*, published by Ramot–Tel Aviv University Press.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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