

Gambling is associated with 'risk-taking behavior' in young teens, study finds

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Gambling among young teens may be associated with increased use of alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana according to a study that surveyed sixth- to eighth-graders in Italian schools. The research is reported in the February issue of the *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, the official journal of the Society for Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics.

The high prevalence of [gambling](#) and its association with substance use "provides further evidence of the need for a greater awareness of gambling behavior in early adolescence," according to the new research by Dr. Alessandra Buja of University of Padova, Italy, and colleagues.

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The study included 1,325 sixth- to eighth-graders from Italian schools participating in a program for the prevention of underage substance abuse. In surveys, the students answered questions about their experience with certain types of gambling: video poker, online betting, and "scratch-and-win" cards (such as lottery tickets).

The students were also asked about their use of [alcohol](#), [cigarettes](#), marijuana, and energy drinks. (Use of energy drinks, which contain stimulants, has been linked to substance use and other risk-taking behaviors.) Associations between gambling and substance use were

evaluated, including adjustment for a wide range of other factors.

The results suggested a high rate of gambling in this group of children and [young teens](#). Among eighth-graders, about 46 percent of boys and 35 percent of girls said they had engaged in at least one sort of gambling. Scratch cards were the most common type of gambling.

Children who had experience with gambling were also more likely to report substance use. Gambling was reported by 60 percent of children who smoked cigarettes, 73 percent of those who used alcohol, and 63 percent of those who used marijuana.

Gambling remained significantly associated with substance use and other risk-taking behaviors, after adjustment for demographic, family, peer, personality, and behavioral characteristics previously linked to substance abuse in young people

Previous studies in older adolescents have linked gambling to substance use disorders. Dr. Buja and coauthors note, "Today's youth are the first generation for whom gambling opportunities are as close as the neighborhood corner store and as easily accessible as the Internet."

The new findings are consistent with previous reports suggesting that many adolescents and even younger children are involved in gambling, despite legal age limits. Parents may see gambling as a harmless activity—rather than restricting or warning against it, they may even initiate their children into betting and gambling.

"Our data show that a history of gambling is associated with risk-taking behavior relating to the use of other [substances](#) in very young adolescents," Dr. Buja and coauthors write. However, they note that the direction of the relationship remains open to debate: "Impulsiveness may be an important common denominator linking gambling with [substance](#)

[abuse](#) in adolescence."

The high rate of gambling and its association with substance use highlights the need for effective strategies to prevent gambling in early adolescence, according to Dr. Buja and colleagues. They conclude, "It is important for healthcare professionals, teachers, and parents to recognize this problem and take it seriously."

More information: Luigi Gallimberti et al. Experience with Gambling in Late Childhood and Early Adolescence, *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* (2016). [DOI: 10.1097/DBP.0000000000000252](https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000252)

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