



## Is there a pill to help control problem gambling?

**T**ypically, problem gambling is treated using psychotherapy, behavioral and cognitive therapy, or self-help groups such as Gambler's Anonymous. However, research into the use of pharmaceuticals to treat problem gambling has steadily increased over the past 20 years and looks increasingly promising. Using medications to treat problem gambling is based on preliminary neurological studies that suggest the presence of dysregulated neurotransmitter systems in problem gamblers. Similarly, it has been noted that problem gambling frequently co-occurs with depression and alcohol abuse, two disorders which are also associated with dysregulated neurotransmitters. A



number of medications are known to be effective in mediating these neurotransmitters and therefore may help reduce problematic

gambling behavior by reducing urges, and thoughts about gambling.

While research has yet to determine whether these dysfunctions are the cause of the behavior or the result of it, studies have demonstrated a variety of medications show promise in decreasing gambling symptoms or behaviors. Studies have focused on the use of three categories of drugs, SSRI antidepressants (fluvoxamine, bupropion), mood stabilizers (lithium carbonate), and opiate antagonists (naltrexone, nalmefene). Results vary across the categories but overall indicate that clients using these medications show some improvement over the short term. The effectiveness of the medication when compared to a placebo is often unclear. No published medical trial has examined long term effectiveness. Thus some people may benefit from the use of medication to help control their gambling. However, additional research using randomized, controlled trials, larger sample sizes, and long-term follow-up is needed to determine how well these effects are maintained over time.

## Use of nalmefene for treatment of problem gambling

**A** just published study reported that nalmefene, a drug that has been used to treat alcoholism, shows promise in curbing urges in problem gamblers. The drug was tested in 207 individuals with a diagnosis of pathological gambling. The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota, utilized 15 different treatment centers across the U.S. The study compared four groups randomly assigned to one of three nalmefene treatment groups (25 mg, 50 mg or 100 mg/day) or a placebo group. Compared to the placebo group, results indicated that those receiving the 25 mg or 50 mg/day reported significantly fewer gambling related urges and behaviors. In addition, of those participants receiving the 25 mg/day dose, 59.2% were "much improved." Improvements were measured by the clinician-administered Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale Modified for Pathological Gambling.

Unfortunately, participants in the study receiving higher doses of nalmefene (50 mg and 100 mg/day) experienced more adverse effects. Such side effects included nausea, dizziness, and insomnia. Those participants receiving the lower nalmefene dose (25 mg/day) reported fewer adverse effects. It should also be noted that individuals received treatment for a total of 16 weeks. Long-term effects of this drug on gambling related thoughts and behaviors are unknown.

This study suggests that nalmefene seems to be effective in treating individuals with gambling problems. It is also suggested that individuals should consider pharmacotherapies in conjunction with cognitive-behavioral treatment, as cognitive-behavioral treatments have been found effective for individuals with gambling problems.

**The Gambling Clinic:**  
*A Center for Self-Change*

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***We want to hear from you!***

Please send your questions or comments to Odds and Ends:

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Each month, we'll select and answer several questions from our readers. We want to hear your concerns and look forward to your feedback.

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## Meet The Gambling Clinic

**A**ndrew W. Meyers Ph.D., is currently Vice Provost for Research and Professor of Psychology at The University of Memphis. Dr. Meyers also co-directs The Gambling Clinic and The Institute for Gambling Education and Research (T.I.G.E.R). His primary research and clinical interests focus on the assessment, prevention and treatment of problem gambling. Dr. Meyers is a 3-time winner of The University's Superior Performance in Research Award and has been awarded the College of Arts and Sciences' Distinguished Research Award and Meritorious Faculty Award. He is also a Fellow of the



American Psychological Association and the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology. Dr. Meyers is married to Lee Dodson Meyers, Director of Marketing for Methodist Healthcare. They have two children. Brian is 16 and a sophomore at Christian Brothers High School where he is on the soccer team. Abby, 10, is a fourth grader at Campus School. She swims for the Memphis Tigers Swim Club. Unlike their parents both Brian and Abby are musical and play piano and guitar. Dr. Meyers promised his family he would only mention the good stuff.

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QUESTIONS,  
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