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Odds on we can help

While many Australians may risk a few dollars on the Melbourne Cup or the odd lottery ticket, for around two per cent of Australians gambling is a problem that will have a devastating effect on their relationships, jobs, health and financial situation.

Over 400,000 Australians are problem gamblers and another 800,000 are at risk. And this may just be the tip of the iceberg, as many gamblers are in denial or reluctant to disclose their problem.

Problem gambling has increased enormously over the past few years, with NSW now home to one-tenth of the world's poker machines.

Experts are also concerned that new poker machines with Xbox-style graphics and interactive gambling options such as on-line challenges and tournaments will attract younger generations and result in a new generation of problem gamblers.

On average a problem gambler will lose over \$12,000 each year, compared with other gamblers who will lose about \$600.

According to Dr Clive Allcock, Specialist Consultant Psychiatrist with the Gambling Counselling Team at Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hospital, problem gambling can be very destructive for relationships, creating financial difficulties and breaking trust.

"Every gambling problem affects at least 10 other people including family, friends and employers. Commonly, a problem gambler will seek help out of desperation when a relationship breaks down, after losing a job or when caught stealing."

Problem gamblers are those who gamble more than they can afford. They often borrow money to pay for living expenses, gamble to win back losses, hide their gambling from others, lose interest in other activities, and find it difficult to quit.

Like any other health problem, difficulties with gambling behaviour can be treated.

"If people are borrowing to feed their gambling habit or gambling to win back losses, maybe it's time to get help," said Dr Allcock.

"One of the biggest hurdles for many gamblers is the grief and shame in realising the amount of money they have lost. But people who want to make it work can change with the right help."

Even if problem gamblers do not acknowledge the seriousness of their problem and refuse treatment, families can often benefit from counselling.

Northern Sydney Central Coast Health has free and confidential Gambling Counselling Services available Monday to Friday. These are located at:

Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hospital – telephone 9477 9567

Mona Vale Hospital – telephone 99980360

Ryde Hospital – telephone 9858 7776

*** Each Gambling Service has a client available to interview.*

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Gambling Fast Facts

- NSW is home to one-tenth of the world's poker machines
- Half of Australia's 300,000 problem gamblers live in NSW
- Lotteries are the most popular form of gambling in Australia
- Poker machines run second and account for over half of the total gambling spend
- Internet gambling is on the rise
- Sports betting has increased, with a 26.6 per cent increase in TAB spending