

Free online casino games linked with higher risks of gambling problems for young people

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Type "slots" into a search engine, and free online games and apps will appear, easily accessible on a phone or computer. A new CAMH study shows that free gambling-themed games may be a gateway to paid

gambling for young people, and gameplay is linked with a higher risk of gambling problems among some adolescents.

While bricks-and-mortar casinos and legal gambling websites are off-limits to adolescents, free online games are open to anyone. Called [social casino](#) games, they let people try their hand at casino table games, slots, poker or bingo without betting real money. Like monetary gambling, people place bets in hopes of winning rewards, in this case, points or prizes within the game only. Because these games don't involve betting or winning money, they're not legally classified as gambling and remain unregulated.

"Adolescents' participation in seemingly risk-free social casino games is a concern because we know that early exposure to gambling activities is a risk factor for developing gambling problems in the future," says Dr. Tara Elton-Marshall, Scientist in CAMH's Institute for Mental Health Policy Research.

In a new CAMH study published this month in *BMC Public Health*, 12 per cent of teens in three Canadian provinces said they had played social casino games in the past three months. The findings are from a survey of 10,035 students in grades 9 to 12 (ages 13 to 19) in Ontario, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador. The survey asked about three game types: Internet poker, Internet slots and social casino games on Facebook.

The study also found that adolescents who participated in social casino games were significantly more likely to participate in monetary gambling, either online or land-based forms, compared with peers who did not play social casino games.

"While it's not clear whether young people begin in social casino games and move to gambling for money, or if adolescents who are gambling for

money also seek out these free games, there is evidence that social casino gaming may build excitement for gambling and encourage the transition into monetary gambling," says Dr. Elton-Marshall, senior author of the study.

As well, 37 to 50 per cent of young people who gambled for money and played social casino games met criteria for low to moderate or high problem gambling. By contrast, roughly 10 per cent of teens who participated in monetary gambling but not in social casino games scored as having a degree of problem gambling.

Scores were calculated using a problem gambling scale created specifically for adolescents, with questions such as how often teens missed activities such as team sports or band due to gambling.

Dr. Elton-Marshall says that social casino games may have higher odds of winning than monetary gambling, giving young people the false impression that they are luckier or better at gambling.

"It's important for young people, parents, teachers and others to be aware that these risks exist," says Dr. Elton-Marshall.

The results are based on responses to the 2012-13 Youth Gambling Survey. "With the growing number of social casino games over the past five years, and high levels of screen time among young people, we believe our findings may under-represent social casino gaming by adolescents today," says Dr. Livia Veselka, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at CAMH and lead author of the study.

The study also investigated characteristics of young people who play each [game](#) type. For example, males were significantly more likely than females to play Internet poker but only slightly more likely to play Internet slots or social casino games on Facebook. "Understanding who

is more likely to play may help tailor interventions and awareness programs to prevent [gambling](#) problems," says Dr. Veselka.

More information: Livia Veselka et al, Factors associated with social casino gaming among adolescents across game types, *BMC Public Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-018-6069-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6069-2)

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