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## Health

# Odd side effect: Gambling

## Possible link to Parkinson's drug explored

By Kathleen Fackelmann  
USA TODAY

A 52-year-old married man had gambled away more than \$100,000 when his wife finally asked for help.

She didn't call Gamblers Anonymous. Instead, she talked to the Mayo Clinic doctor who had been treating her husband for Parkinson's, an incurable brain disorder.

M. Leann Dodd of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and a team of neurologists identified 11 cases in which compulsive gambling had developed almost overnight in people who were taking medication for Parkinson's.

"Most of these patients had no idea this gambling problem was connected to their Parkinson's medication," Dodd says. She and her colleagues described the cases last year in the *Archives of Neurology*.

The study — and others like it that suggest that Parkinson's medication might trigger a gambling urge for some patients — serve as a warning for the estimated 1 million

### Warning signs

Some signs of a gambling problem:

- ▶ Spending a lot of time thinking about gambling.
- ▶ An urge to gamble with increasing amounts of money.
- ▶ Lying to family or friends about gambling habits.
- ▶ Repeated attempts to cut back or stop gambling.
- ▶ Writing bad checks, stealing, or taking out loans to pay for gambling.

Source: The National Council on Problem Gambling

people in the USA who have the disease. But such research also might help millions of Americans who have a gambling habit.

"The research may teach us about pathological gambling in the general population," says Mark Stacy, a Duke University neurologist who outlined the evidence on Parkinson's and gambling Sunday at the World Parkinson Congress in Washington, D.C.

The growing body of research includes a study published in February in the *Archives of Neurology*.

Ana Szarfman of the Food and Drug Administration used a computer program to search the FDA's national database to see whether there were any reports of gambling linked to prescription drugs.

Szarfman and her colleagues discovered 67 cases of gambling. Medications used to treat Parkinson's accounted for most of those, but one Parkinson's drug stood out: Pramipexole or Mirapex had 39 reports of gambling. This drug alone accounted for 58% of the cases of gambling reported to the FDA, says co-author P. Murali Doraiswamy, who is also at Duke University.

This study doesn't prove that Parkinson's drugs can trigger gambling. "We're not saying this is cause and effect," he says.

But the evidence so far does fit together with what is known about how these drugs affect the brain, Dodd says.

These drugs act on specialized receptors in the limbic system, a brain region that controls emotions. When it is overstimulated, it can lead to impulsive behaviors, such as compulsive gambling, according to a Mayo Clinic release.

Right now, the gambling problem seems to be a rare side effect of drugs that also offer relief for Parkinson's symptoms, Stacy says.