Gambling and You: Questions you may have

What is a gambling addiction?

It's when the urges to gamble are so strong that you do it even though you know it's going to damage your health and cause financial problems. Many people say they can't stop gambling from the moment they get up to the moment they go to bed. Some are so ashamed of their gambling they hide it away from others. Often the financial stress of gambling is overwhelming and you've got yourself into so much debt that you feel the only way to get out of it is to continue to gamble. The most serious aspect of gambling is when you 'chase your losses'. This is when you start losing and desperately try to win back your money by continuing to gamble, only to end up with more losses.

Who is most likely to be affected by gambling?

Gambling can affect anyone, at any age, whether you've got money or not. At GamCare, we speak to people who have virtually no money because of their gambling and find themselves on the street or facing a marriage break-up. We also have high-powered professional people who get into difficulties with gambling. People between the ages of 16 and 24 are four times more likely to develop a gambling problem than any other age group.

What are the temptations to gamble?

If you compare gambling to smoking, which is an equally powerful addiction, you could say it's easier to give up smoking. Smoking has been banned in many public places and there are numerous ads telling you how bad it is for you. The publicity surrounding gambling is the opposite, with adverts encouraging you to gamble. There is the National Lottery, sports and quiz programmes, and the internet is available 24/7. These are huge triggers, so if you've got a gambling addiction it's getting increasingly difficult to escape from it.

How can gambling be a healthy hobby?

If you have a bet or go out for a night, when you win, be happy and walk away. Don't see it as a way of making money or as a way of increasing your self-esteem. It's simply a form of entertainment, and that's the healthy way to gamble. The unhealthy aspect of gambling is when you're seeing it as an easy or quick way to make money - it's not. Over a long period of time you can't win at gambling because the odds are always stacked against you. This is the reason why casinos and betting shops make so much money. The second unhealthy aspect of gambling is when you do it in order to make yourself feel better about yourself. You may start feeling better at the beginning, but you could end up feeling a lot worse. The third aspect is when you're gambling as a way of escaping your problems, rather than addressing the issues.

How will giving up gambling affect an addict?
What is not well known, even among people with a gambling addiction, is that you can get withdrawal symptoms just as if you're coming off drugs, alcohol or cigarettes, even though there's no actual substance in you that's making you gamble. There may be a feeling of restlessness and a sense of not knowing what to do with your time, which can make you feel you've got to have another bet. There could also be disturbed sleep, mood swings, headaches or other stress-induced symptoms such as IBS. At the same time there are people who can just walk away from it and not go through any of these symptoms.

**How can you stop gambling in the first place?**

It's not always a matter of trying to reduce gambling - if you've got a severe addiction you should have some time away before you consider going back into a controlled gambling situation, and not everyone can do that. A lot of people when they have an addiction will either not know it, or will be in what counsellors call 'denial', where they are actually saying that they can stop if they need to, they just don't want to. If there is a family member or a friend who is showing the signs, the best thing you can do is say very gently and sensitively: "I'm not saying you've got a problem, but why don't you talk to someone and see if you do." That would be the encouragement they may need to get some support and professional help.

**How can you deal with a relapse?**

If you've been trying to stop and you go back to gambling, don't treat it as a disaster and worry that you've messed up and are back to square one. Learn from the mistake you've made and understand why you did it, and then put the lessons you've learnt into action. In moments of despair, like anything else, always get someone to talk it through with you and share your burden - preferably professionals, but if you can't, a trusted friend.