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University research outlines the dangers of slot machines

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OTTAWA -- Believe it or not, there's science behind gambling.

Not some hocus-pocus scheme to win jackpots but hard facts about the addictive potential of slot machines.

The Carleton University Gambling Laboratory, a think-tank deciphering what makes gamblers keep coming back, says slot machines like those at the Rideau-Carleton Raceway are nearly four times more addictive than regular card tables.

A sobering thought with the idea of a large permanent casino perhaps coming to the capital region.

Head researcher, Prof. Michael Wohl, said that's because players can sit for long periods of time in a relatively low-stress situation and can cash in their winnings without leaving their seats.

It's also due to grave misconceptions about how slot machines work.

"A lot of people think that every time you spin a slot machine you're getting closer and closer to a win," Dr. Wohl explains.

But that's simply not the case.

He describes them as a mixed bag of marbles.

Within it, there's one "jackpot" marble combined with hundreds of losses. When you play a machine, one of those losses falls out of the bag.

But what many people don't understand is before your very next spin, that dud marble goes right back into the bag. The odds of winning or losing are always exactly the same.

Gail Young, who was having lunch at the Raceway on Sunday, said it's the instant gratification that draws people.

"It's very easy to get sucked in and just stick with it," she said. "You're on your own, there's nobody to stop you. It's a very solitary kind of activity."

According to the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse, 80% of problem gamblers in Ontario cite slot machines as their problem.

The largest percentage are seniors and low-income earners.

"I think a lot of seniors come here as a group," said Elisse Meshke, who was spending Sunday afternoon at Rideau Carleton.

"It's a way to get out of the monotonous life at old-age homes."

The Gambling Lab has even constructed a virtual casino to see which types of games are most popular and who is most susceptible.

Volunteers don a virtual reality visor that allows them to walk through a casino environment - complete with other gamblers, neon lights and of course an absolute absence of clocks.

The team can monitor everything from rising blood pressure to changing hormones to gauge reactions to near misses on slot machines.

Their research has led them to make an animated video debunking the myths about casinos, which has been distributed in more than 150 jurisdictions around the world.

They're also studying how pop-up notifications can tell people when they've reached the limits they set for themselves.