CONDITION

Video game addiction

Video game addiction is persistent, hard-to-control gaming that causes serious problems in daily life.

WHAT IT IS
Persistent gaming pattern causing major life impairment

BODY SYSTEM
Brain, mental health, and behaviour

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Lost control, gaming priority, continued play despite harm

WHAT CAUSES IT
Psychological, social, and game-related factors

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Clinical assessment of gaming, impairment, and duration

MAIN TREATMENT
Psychological therapy, family support, and practical behaviour change

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - many regain control with appropriate support

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - self-harm thoughts or unsafe behaviour

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Improvement is possible; ongoing difficulties and relapse can occur

Overview

"Video game addiction" is an everyday term for gaming that has become difficult to control and is causing major harm. The World Health Organization uses the diagnosis gaming disorder . It can involve online or offline games played on consoles, computers, phones, or other devices.

The key issue is not the number of hours spent gaming by itself. Some people play for long periods without serious problems. Gaming becomes a health concern when it repeatedly takes priority over sleep, education, work, relationships, hygiene, or other essential parts of life.

A person with gaming disorder may continue or increase their gaming despite clear harm. They may have tried to reduce it but found that they could not maintain the change. The pattern usually lasts for at least 12 months, although a clinician may diagnose it sooner when symptoms are severe.

The American Psychiatric Association uses the related term internet gaming disorder , which is listed as a condition needing further research in its diagnostic manual. Because definitions differ, clinicians may use different terms.

Enjoying games, thinking about them, or playing competitively does not automatically mean addiction. Diagnosis depends on loss of control and meaningful disruption to daily life.

Symptoms

The central symptom is reduced control over gaming. This can affect when gaming starts, how long it lasts, and whether the person can stop as planned.

Possible signs include:

Sleep may shift later and later, especially when games involve international teams, timed events, or rewards for daily play. Some people miss appointments or stay away from school or work.

These signs do not prove that someone has gaming disorder. Similar changes can occur with depression, anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, sleep disorders, bipolar disorder, substance use, bullying, or major stress. A full assessment is needed to understand what is happening.

- Gaming taking priority over meals, sleep, school, work, relationships, or self-care
- Repeated unsuccessful attempts to cut down
- Continuing to play despite poor grades, job problems, conflict, debt, or health effects
- Hiding gaming time, purchases, or their consequences
- Feeling irritable, restless, or distressed when unable to play
- Losing interest in activities that were previously important
- Using games mainly to escape painful feelings or difficult situations
- Returning quickly to harmful patterns after trying to stop

Causes and risk factors

There is no single cause. Gaming disorder is thought to develop through a combination of personal circumstances, mental health, social surroundings, and features of games.

Games offer challenge, achievement, social contact, and a clear sense of progress. These can

be positive experiences. However, gaming may become harder to regulate when it is the main source of confidence, connection, or relief from distress.

Factors linked with a greater risk include:

These factors do not mean that gaming disorder will develop. Many people with them maintain a healthy relationship with games.

Gaming disorder is not simply a lack of willpower. Games are designed to hold attention, and personal problems can make their rewards especially important. At the same time, the game alone does not explain why one person develops serious problems while another does not.

- Depression, anxiety, loneliness, or difficulty coping with stress
- Attention or impulse-control difficulties
- Social isolation, bullying, family conflict, or problems at school or work
- Few rewarding activities away from gaming
- Easy access to gaming at all hours
- Game features involving endless progression, social pressure, or frequent rewards
- Spending systems that encourage repeated purchases or randomized rewards

Diagnosis

There is no blood test, brain scan, or single questionnaire that confirms gaming disorder. Diagnosis is based on a clinical assessment, usually by a mental health professional or another clinician with relevant experience.

The assessment may cover:

Questionnaires can help identify possible problems, but they are not enough on their own. A clinician will distinguish intense but healthy enthusiasm from a persistent pattern causing significant impairment.

For a child or teenager, the assessment should consider development, family routines, school life, friendships, and whether gaming is meeting needs that are not being met elsewhere. Adults may also need help reviewing employment, caregiving duties, finances, or relationship stress.

- The types of games played and the usual pattern of play
- Control over starting, stopping, and limiting gaming
- Effects on sleep, self-care, relationships, education, work, and money

- How long the difficulties have been present
- Attempts to cut down and what happened afterward
- Mood, anxiety, attention, substance use, and physical health
- Information from family members, when appropriate and agreed

Treatment and management

Treatment aims to restore control and improve daily functioning. It does not always require giving up every game permanently. Some people work toward balanced, planned gaming. Others find that avoiding certain games or stopping for a period is more manageable.

Psychological therapy is the main form of treatment. Cognitive behavioural therapy , often called CBT, helps a person recognize patterns linking thoughts, feelings, gaming, and consequences. It can also build skills for handling urges, solving problems, and developing rewarding activities outside gaming.

Motivational approaches can help when someone feels uncertain about changing. The therapist works with the person's own goals rather than relying on blame or confrontation.

Treatment may also involve:

For children and teenagers, family involvement is often important. Boundaries tend to work better when they are predictable, age-appropriate, and combined with appealing alternatives. Sudden confiscation without discussion may increase conflict, although immediate limits may be necessary if there is a safety or financial risk.

No medication is established specifically for gaming disorder. Medication may be offered for a separate condition, such as depression or ADHD, following its usual assessment and treatment process.

Specialist or intensive support may be considered when problems are severe, previous treatment has not helped, or the person cannot maintain basic routines. Evidence about the best treatments is still developing, so plans may need adjustment over time.

- A planned gaming schedule with clear stopping points
- Regular sleep, meals, movement, work, and study routines
- Removing gaming devices from the bedroom at night
- Disabling notifications or automatic purchases
- Using device or account tools to limit time or spending

- Rebuilding social contact and offline interests
- Family therapy or parent support
- Treatment for related depression, anxiety, attention problems, or sleep difficulties

Complications

Gaming disorder can affect several areas of life at once. Missed classes or work may lead to academic failure, disciplinary action, or loss of employment. Conflict and secrecy can damage trust within families and relationships.

Late-night play can cause ongoing sleep loss, daytime tiredness, poor concentration, and mood changes. Long periods of sitting may contribute to reduced fitness, back or neck discomfort, headaches, or hand and wrist pain. Irregular meals and reduced self-care may also affect health.

Some games allow rapid or repeated spending. This can lead to debt, unauthorized purchases, or conflict over shared money.

Depression, anxiety, loneliness, and gaming problems can reinforce one another. It may be unclear which started first, but both may need attention. Severe distress can sometimes involve self-harm or suicidal thoughts, which require urgent help.

Prevention

Gaming disorder cannot always be prevented. Games are a normal source of entertainment and social contact, and there is no time limit that guarantees someone will or will not develop a problem.

Healthy habits may reduce risk. It can help to agree that gaming should not regularly replace sleep, meals, education, work, physical activity, or in-person relationships. Planned stopping times are often easier to follow than deciding when to stop in the middle of play.

Parents and caregivers can learn how a child's games work, including communication, purchases, daily rewards, and parental controls. Calm, regular conversations about gaming are more useful than discussing it only during conflict.

Early action matters when control is slipping. Warning signs include repeated overnight play, secrecy, missed responsibilities, escalating spending, or giving up most other interests. Addressing stress, bullying, loneliness, or mental health symptoms may also prevent gaming from becoming the person's main coping method.

Living with it and what to expect

Change often happens over months rather than days. Early progress may focus on restoring sleep, meals, attendance, and basic responsibilities before reducing gaming further.

Urges can be strong when a familiar game releases new content or when online friends expect someone to join. Stress, loneliness, and unstructured time may also trigger a return to old patterns. A setback does not erase earlier progress, but it can show where the plan needs more support.

Some people eventually return to controlled gaming. They may avoid specific games, limit devices, or play only at planned times. Others find that not gaming is simpler than trying to moderate it. There is no single goal that suits everyone.

Relationships may take time to recover, especially if there has been secrecy, missed commitments, or financial harm. Consistent behaviour is usually more important than promises of sudden change.

Long-term outcomes are mixed. Many people improve with support and practical changes, while some experience repeated periods of difficulty. Coexisting mental health conditions, family circumstances, and access to treatment can affect recovery. Gaming itself may remain an enjoyable part of life if control and balance are restored.

When to get medical help

Arrange a routine appointment with a primary care or mental health professional if gaming is repeatedly disrupting sleep, school, work, relationships, self-care, or finances. It is also reasonable to seek help after unsuccessful attempts to cut down, even if the person is unsure whether the term "addiction" fits.

Prompt assessment is important if someone is missing most school or work, staying awake through repeated nights, neglecting food or hygiene, spending money they cannot afford, or becoming increasingly depressed or isolated.

Seek urgent mental health help if there are thoughts of self-harm or suicide, severe agitation, confusion, or behaviour that feels unsafe.

Call emergency services if there is an immediate risk of suicide, serious self-harm, violence, or danger to another person. Stay with the person if it is safe to do so, and move away from weapons or other immediate hazards.

Common questions

How many hours of gaming counts as an addiction?

There is no fixed number. Time matters, but the main signs are loss of control and serious harm to daily life. A long gaming session during free time is different from repeatedly missing sleep, work, school, or essential care.

Is video game addiction a real condition?

Yes. The World Health Organization recognizes gaming disorder as a health condition. However, "video game addiction" is an informal term, and diagnostic systems do not all use the same wording or criteria.

Can I still have gaming disorder if I only play one game?

Yes. The number of games is not important. A problem can centre on one game, several games, or a particular type of online activity.

Do I have to quit gaming completely?

Not always. Some people regain control through planned, limited play. Others do better by avoiding certain games or stopping entirely. Treatment considers the severity of the problems and what approach can be maintained safely.

Are loot boxes the same as gaming disorder?

No. Loot boxes are in-game purchases offering randomized items. They may encourage repeated spending and have features similar to gambling, but spending on them does not by itself establish gaming disorder. Financial harm should still be addressed.

Can children grow out of excessive gaming?

Interests and routines can change with age, but serious impairment should not simply be assumed to disappear. Early support can address sleep, school attendance, family conflict, and any mental health or social problems contributing to gaming.

Sources

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