



SENIOR FOCUS

Concerning Seniors with Gambling Problems

VOLUME 6

888-ADMIT-IT

About the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling

Hundreds of thousands of Floridians suffer from problem and compulsive gambling difficulties. Helping those individuals is the mission of the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling as a not-for-profit educational and advocacy organization under contract with Florida state government. For information, call: **888-ADMIT-IT** (888-236-4848)



If you or someone you know has a problem, call the FCCG 24-hour confidential Helpline **888-ADMIT-IT** (888-236-4848)

Problem Gambling Among Elders - A Major Health Issue



More and more older adults find themselves spending time and money on gambling as they look for new recreational outlets in order to fill time and socialize with friends. Most seniors can gamble safely, and senior centers often provide day trips or transportation to gaming facilities that are fun and inviting, however, as greater numbers of seniors participate in gambling, there will continue to be greater numbers developing problems. The dangers for those who lose control over gambling is real. It is not just that the person may cause harm to their overall financial state, but gambling can create serious problems for the person's physical and emotional health along with their overall well being.

One out of five callers seeking help from the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling's HelpLine, are ages 55 and older. Florida elders who gamble report higher levels of physical and emotional health problems, and report that their overall level of health is only fair at best. Alcohol, tobacco and other drug use for

non-medical reasons tends to be higher and the group is more likely to report depression.

“Similar to other addictive behaviors, problem gambling can be considered a precipitating factor in many health related conditions.”

Whether caused by an increase in substance use and tobacco exposure, problem gambling can be a precipitating factor in numerous health problems. The increased stress and anxiety faced by those experiencing gambling related difficulties, or failing to take care of one's needs when gambling such as eating properly, taking needed medication, or taking breaks from play to do other activities may all be contributors. Problem gamblers often experience liver, lung, and heart disease, poor nutrition, physical pain, depression and anxiety, and sleep disorders. Because a percentage of older adults already experience many of the above conditions to some degree, friends, family, health care and medical professionals, often miss the warning signs that gambling is becoming a problem, and never think to ask about the person's gambling behaviors.

Is Gambling Affecting your health status?

What's Your Gambling Score?

If you or someone you love gambles and you suspect a gambling problem is developing or gambling related behaviors are impacting your health, consider the information below:

Do you or someone you know experience one or more of the following due to gambling?

- Depression or anxiety
- Heart palpitations
- Headaches
- Sleeplessness
- Poor nutrition
- Alcohol or drug use

If you answered yes to one or more, gambling may be a problem. For information and free supports nearest you, call:

24-hour HelpLine:
(Confidential & Multilingual)
888-ADMIT-IT
(888-236-4848)



Is your medication causing you to gamble?

New research has found that some medications, including drugs used to treat both Parkinson's Disease and Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS), may increase compulsive gambling behaviors as a side effect. These drugs boost the level of dopamine in the brain, a chemical the body naturally produces. Dopamine's primary function is to control movement, but it is also linked to the pleasurable feelings associated with sex and food and is thought to play a role in addictive behaviors such as alcohol and other drug use, increased spending, and compulsive gambling.

Some can gamble without problems for years, while others find

Escape Gambling

There are many types of older adults who participate in gambling. There are those who have always gambled, played cards, BINGO or engaged in betting as a form of recreation and now that they are getting older with more time on their hands, find that their gambling is increasing. There is also the new gambler, the person who never gambled with any regularity in the past but who now enjoys gambling as a recreational and social entertainment option. Regardless of whether a person is new to gambling or has gambled recreationally for a long time, experiencing loss, whether it is the loss of a spouse, profession (retirement), one's health, physical ability or perceived status may place that person at greater risk for developing a gambling problem.

themselves losing control when just beginning to gamble. If the behavior is a side-effect of a prescription drug, the compulsive behavior often dissipates after the drug is discontinued. In some cases, the individual may have developed a serious gambling problem and will need further treatment and intervention to stop the continued progression of compulsive gambling.

If you or someone you know is being treated for Parkinson's disease, RLS, or another neurological condition, be sure to question your doctor about the side effects of any prescribed medication, and note any changes in behavior.

Gambling can be used as an escape. The excitement of the game and the environment may all create a step outside of reality that can become addicting for some. Gambling may relieve boredom and depression and fill a void. If a person develops a problem with gambling the positive impacts will lessen and negative consequences will begin. The person may begin having 'magical' or fantasy thoughts that they have a system for winning or an irrational belief that they are destined to win and their lives will be changed forever. They may chase losses with larger bets to try to recoup money that they have lost, sure that the next big win is around the corner despite evidence and odds to the contrary. They may be less able to understand or calculate the odds of winning or losing or even to manage

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their finances due to lack of sleep or changes in cognitive abilities.

For an older adult, it may be difficult to intervene. It may be hard to question a behavior that seems to make them happy. It may be hard to identify if the

behavior is the problem or if it is a result of other losses that the person has suffered. But if you are concerned, speak up. Suggest alternative activities such as going to movies or plays, golfing, taking day trips, shopping or joining in

another type of club or activity. If the person's problem with gambling continues, call the FCCG HelpLine (888-ADMIT-IT) for information about problem gambling and available resources for help.

What You Need to Know about Gambling Addiction and Health Impacts

Older adults, as well as their younger counterparts, experience a series of health related impacts when gambling in excess. Knowing how gambling can negatively affect one's health and becoming knowledgeable about associated physical and emotional symptoms can aid compulsive gamblers and their families in identifying a gambling addiction and the need for treatment. Gambling addiction is treatable, but only in instances when individuals seek help.

Sleep Disorders

Sleep disorders, such as trouble falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, and frequent waking, can be brought on by prolonged stress or worries faced by those adversely affected by gambling. Sleep deprivation may also be a concern for the person who cannot pull themselves away from playing a specific slot machine or game, causing them to stay longer than they had intended and not get the rest or sleep that they need. Effects of sleep loss due to gambling can be quite severe and can lead to risky decision-making, headaches, dizziness and fainting, along with a host of other medical conditions.

Mood Disorders

Mental health issues can trigger gambling problems or can co-exist with gambling problems. Struggles with identity, depression and anxiety may occur in people's lives as they transition from one stage of their life to another. Many times these mental health struggles are expected and are a normal part of aging. However, at times, people may experience difficulty with thoughts, feelings or behaviors that are so severe that it begins to interfere with their life. People who develop gambling dependency often experience mood swings,

high anxiety and irritability, lack of sleep, very poor nutritional habits, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

Alcohol and Tobacco Use and Gambling

Gambling and alcohol consumption sometimes go hand in hand. There is a very high incidence of alcohol abuse and depression in compulsive gamblers and an increased rate of health problems associated with this combination. Many compulsive gamblers turn to heavy drinking as a means of self-medicating or coping, further exposing their bodies to harm and health conditions.

Gambling is also associated with increased tobacco use. Some of the facilities permit smoking, increasing a gambler's exposure to second hand smoke or personal use of tobacco products. Use and the secondhand effects of tobacco smoke and nicotine can impact a person's overall health and well being. Gamblers report higher rates of tobacco product use than their non-gambling counterparts, further increasing their risk of lung cancer and other smoke related diseases.

High Blood Pressure and Heart Disease

In some cases, compulsive gambling may exacerbate heart disease and compound issues linked to high blood pressure. When a compulsive gambler's betting begins to progress, it causes higher and higher levels of stress and anxiety for the gambler. Not eating properly and diminished self-care often includes neglecting to take prescribed medications, including those that control high blood pressure or cholesterol, and may lead to an increase in physical health problems. Untreated or undiagnosed high blood pressure can lead to stroke, kidney failure, and/or a heart attack.

Physical Pain and Stomach Ailments can be Signs of a Gambling Problem

Gambling is one activity older adults can participate in despite limits that might occur in other areas as their mobility decreases with age. Gambling is one of the few exciting and stimulating activities that is accessible year round for persons who enjoy being a part of the action. Gambling may seem like a good alternative for someone with limited mobility, however, if a person with limited mobility develops a problem

with gambling, spending hours gambling may decrease mobility further and increase pain symptoms. Physical pain can be a result of a gambler's sedentary lifestyle (e.g. sitting in front of a slot machine, computer, or poker table for long periods of time and doing the same motion repeatedly), resulting in physical pain to the neck, back, shoulders, and other areas.

Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression may also make itself known through increased sensitivity and pain, including stomach distress and problems. Malnutrition, dehydration and ulcers can and do develop in persons with severe gambling problems. Individuals with pre-existing conditions, experience an increased risk of health problems when gambling in excess.

Loved One's also Suffer with Health Problems

Family members frequently bare the brunt of the difficulties caused by the compulsive gambler. In addition to experiencing difficulties such as emotional distress and financial and health related problems, the burden of a gambling problem is largely left on the shoulders of the family. Spouses or significant others of the gambler often report experiencing physical and emotional problems, such as sleeplessness, stress, depression

or social isolation, mirroring the symptoms of the gambler. Research has shown that family members of problem gamblers also report having high levels of depression and more frequently attempt suicide than others in the general population.

Compulsive gambling is often the invisible cause of many health problems. Left undiagnosed and untreated, problem gambling will progress until it robs a person

of everything, finances, homes, relationships, health, and possibly even their life. Whether the gambler, or the loved one of the gambler, there is hope and help. The Council can provide information and referrals for those suffering from adverse affects caused by compulsive gambling. Simply contact the HelpLine at 888-ADMIT-IT.



Problem Gambling Warning Signs Among Older Adults

- Preoccupation with gambling
- Gambling to calm nerves, forget worries or reduce depression
- Needing to gamble larger and larger amounts of money to experience the thrill
- Withdrawal from family, friends or regular activities
- Mood swings based upon winnings and losses
- Withdrawal anxiety experienced after gambling excursions
- Neglecting personal needs or health
- Secrecy, avoidance or lying when questioned about gambling habits
- Using retirement funds or cashing in an insurance policy to fund gambling
- Missing possessions or assets, including pawning or sale of personal items
- Sudden need for money or loans
- Depression or self-destructive thoughts

For information and resource referrals for a gambling problem, call the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling HelpLine. The organization offers free recovery workbooks, literature and other information that can help older adults and loved ones.

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