

APA ADVISORY ON INTERNET GAMBLING

FROM THE COMMITTEE ON TREATMENT SERVICES FOR ADDICTED PATIENTS

Why is there concern about Internet gambling?

With the remarkable growth of legal forms of gambling in the United States over the past two decades has come an increasing awareness of the personal and social costs of gambling problems. Federal legislation established the National Gambling Impact Study Commission in 1997 to investigate the impact of gambling on U.S. society and make recommendations accordingly. The Commission estimated that gambling problems cost the nation about \$5 billion annually.

Research has shown a correlation between the availability of legal gambling in an individual state and the proportion of that state's population reporting gambling problems. In virtually all studies of the rates of gambling problems at various ages, high school and college-aged individuals show the highest problem rates.

In recent years there has been an explosive growth of gambling opportunity and activity on the Internet. The National Commission reported that while in 1997 there were approximately 6.9 million potential Internet gamblers and a revenue of about \$300 million from this activity, just one year later there were 14.5 million potential Internet gamblers and a revenue of \$651 million. And last year, there were more than 1,300 of these online sites.

Internet gambling differs from other forms of gambling in that there are few – if any – regulations to assure the fairness of games or establish the responsibility of game operators, most of whom operate from servers located outside the United States. Unlike gambling activities that are subject to state and federal regulation, there is no control on the hours of availability, age of participants or type of games offered. An unscrupulous operator can merely close down a site or move its base to another country if challenged. Hackers can potentially interfere with the process by manipulating the online games, as well as stealing funds by accessing the credit card numbers used in the gambling.

In addition, Internet gambling, unlike many other types of gambling activity, is a solitary activity, which makes it even more dangerous: people can gamble uninterrupted and undetected for unlimited periods of time. Regular or heavy users of the Internet have been found more likely to participate in Internet gambling than other users.

What are the dangers of gambling in general?

About 10% to 15% of young people surveyed in the United States and Canada report having experienced one or more significant problems related to gambling. Included among these problem gamblers is the 1% to 6% of young people who may satisfy diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling. In addition, there is evidence that the rate of gambling problems is rising among young people. One significant hazard is that many online games sites – which target children and teens – have direct links to gambling sites. Many of these sites offer “freebies” and other supposed discounts to get young people started.

What is Pathological Gambling? Problem Gambling?

Pathological gambling is a disorder characterized by maladaptive gambling behavior leading to negative personal, family and/or social consequences. To be diagnosed with this disorder, the individual must have experienced five or more of ten characteristic symptoms, including:

- preoccupation with gambling-related thoughts, plans or activities;
- needing to gamble with increased sums to produce the desired excitement;
- restlessness or irritability when attempting to cut down or stop gambling;
- gambling to escape from problems or relieve an undesired mood such as helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression;
- after losing money gambling, often returning to try to win it back (chasing losses);
- lying to conceal gambling activities or consequences;
- committing illegal acts to finance gambling;
- jeopardizing or losing a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of gambling;
- relying on a “bailout” (money from others to relieve a desperate gambling-related financial situation);
- having made repeated unsuccessful attempts to control, cut back or stop gambling.

Higher rates are usually found in individuals who report gambling problems in a parent or other close relative and in males, although girls and women are also at risk.

Pathological gambling is often characterized as an addiction-like disorder, with the affected person being addicted to the excitement felt while being “in action” (gambling). Pathological gambling is sometimes accompanied by other disorders such as alcohol or drug abuse, or depression.

“Problem gambling” is a term used to cover both pathological gamblers and those who are having some gambling-related problems but do not have a sufficient number of symptoms for a diagnosis of pathological gambling. The latter group is at high risk for developing pathological gambling.

What can be done about gambling problems?

Help is available through psychiatrists, other mental health professionals and organized gambling treatment programs. Most treatment is done on an outpatient basis. Student Health facilities can often provide help or referral for treatment. Gamblers Anonymous (www.gamblersanonymous.org) is a self-help group that assists pathological gamblers. Treatment can also be helpful to family members who are affected by gambling problems. Gam-Anon (www.gam-anon.org) is a self-help program for such family members.

How can gambling problems be prevented?

Most young people know little or nothing about gambling and gambling problems. Gambling is looked upon as a harmless pastime, with little hazard other than the loss of a few dollars. If a friend seems to be losing touch with other activities and becoming increasingly involved in Internet or other gambling, most young people are not aware that their friend is in need of help or that help is available. Campus and community educational programs dealing with gambling and related problems are needed.

The National Gambling Impact Study Commission recommended that Congress ban all Internet gambling in the United States because of the difficulties in regulating the fairness and safety of the process. To date, no such action has been taken. Until it is, young people should be especially aware of the dangers of Internet gambling, and other forms of gambling as well.

In summary:

Gambling activities have greatly increased in the United States in recent years. This increase has been accompanied by a rise in the incidence of gambling problems. Young people are at special risk for problem gambling and should be aware of the hazards of this activity, especially the danger of Internet gambling, which may pose an increased risk to high school and college-aged populations.

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The American Psychiatric Association is the national medical specialty society whose 40,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses and substance use disorders.