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February 21, 2006

Gambling is Not Always Fun and Games

The record jackpot in the recent Power Ball game no doubt enticed even those who do not normally play to buy a ticket. Lotteries are prevalent throughout the country, making this form of legalized gambling a major source of income for many state budgets. Some states have gone from sponsoring lotteries to permitting other forms of gambling as a means of raising revenue. In fact, according to the American Academy of Physicians (AAP), the number of states with legalized gambling rose from 2 in 1978 to 48 in 1998.

With legalized gambling common in so many states, it is no wonder that the number of people who gamble has also risen. The AAP reports that 61% of the population in America gambled in the 1960s, but in 1991, the rate had risen to 80%. Fortunately, whether purchasing lottery tickets or engaging in some other form of legalized gambling, most people play for entertainment and fully realize that the odds are against them.

But for some people, gambling for fun leads to addiction. These people, known as problem gamblers, suffer from an addiction not unlike alcoholism. The National Council on Problem Gambling defines problem gambling as “an increasing preoccupation with gambling, a need to bet more money more frequently, restlessness or irritability when attempting to stop, chasing losses, and loss of control. . . .” “A person addicted to gambling continues to gamble “in spite of mounting, serious, negative consequences.”

Problem gambling occurs in all races, ages, genders, and socio-economic classes. Further, it frequently occurs in association with depression and/or alcohol abuse. And the economic costs of problem gambling are tremendous: it is estimated that about ½ trillion dollars is bet each year in the United States, with approximately \$31.5 billion spent on state lottery games alone. Research conducted at the University of Chicago estimated that over 5 million people in the U.S. are or should be considered to be problem gamblers, and they cost society nearly “\$5 billion per year and an additional \$40 billion in lifetime costs for productivity reductions, social services, and creditor losses.”

As with other addictions, problem gambling results in a number of negative consequences. Considerable sums of money are lost, leading to financial trouble. Relations with family and friends suffer, performance at work or school declines, and many times, money needed for basic needs like food and housing is squandered. Usually, a problem gambler will deny he or she has a problem until the situation is nearly out of control and drastic measures are needed.

While it is true gambling can affect any one, the problem of youth gambling is emerging as a public health concern of major importance. In a number of studies, high school and college students have been shown to have a higher rate of problem gambling than the general adult population. In this state, the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling conducted a study among Connecticut high school students and found some disturbing results:

- about 92% of males and 84% of females gamble, but males were three times more likely to have a gambling problem.
- Problem gamblers were nearly five times more likely to begin gambling at age 8 or younger.
- Gambling is common on school grounds. About 12.2% of problem gamblers wagered on campus weekly, and 14.4% gambled daily on school

property.

-31% of problem gamblers bet over \$151 a day, and 20% carried a debt of over \$201.

-The rate of gambling exceeded the rate of substance abuse among high school students.

Fortunately for problem gamblers of all ages, the addiction can be treated. Once the problem is recognized, the first step in treatment is often to call the family doctor. A referral may be made for counseling or cognitive or behavioral therapy, or a recommendation may be made to participate in a group step-program like Gamblers Anonymous, modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous. And just in the past few weeks, researchers at the University of Minnesota concluded that daily doses of nalmefene, a medication currently used to treat alcoholism, seems to lessen the desire to gamble, and may prove to be another tool in fighting this addiction.

To obtain further information about problem gambling, call the National Council on Problem Gambling at 800-522-4700 (www.ncpgambling.org) or the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling at 203-453-0138 (www.ccp.org). Additional information about this other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).