

PROVIDER UPDATE

Problem Gambling Among Older Adults

Recreational gambling can provide fun and social interaction that can be enjoyable for older adults. However, older adults are susceptible to problem gambling, which is defined as persistent, maladaptive gambling behavior that creates a negative impact on an older person's life or on the lives of family, friends, and co-workers. Problem gambling can lead to emotional and financial devastation, as well as illegal acts.

Professionals who work with older populations are in an ideal position to identify gambling problems and inform older adults about potential risks. In this Update, you will find:

- Facts about problem gambling among older adults
- Risk factors associated with problem gambling
- Symptoms of problem gambling
- Tips for talking to older adults about gambling
- Resources and referral helplines

CONSIDER THIS:

- Older adults are aggressively targeted by the gambling industry with offers of free food, transportation, and other promotions.ⁱ
- The financial devastation older adults face as a result of problem gambling is often serious due to the fact that many older adults live on fixed incomes.ⁱⁱ



Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services
Office of Healthy Aging

ⁱNixon, G., Solowoniuk, J., Hagen, Br., & Williams, R.J. (2005). "Double trouble": The lived experience of problem and pathological gambling in later life. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 14, 1-21.

ⁱⁱWiebe, J. M.D., & Cox, B. J. (2005). Problem and probable pathological gambling among older adults assessed by the SOGS-R. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 21, 205-221.

ⁱⁱⁱBased on the 2002 Massachusetts Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance Survey and the 2000 Massachusetts Census.

RISK FACTORS AND SYMPTOMS:

Frequency of gambling does not necessarily indicate a gambling problem. In some cultures, gambling is an acceptable part of the social fabric. Providers should consider risk factors, cultural values, and symptoms when assessing problem gambling.

Risk Factors for Problem Gambling among Older Adults

- ✓ Recent loss of spouse/partner or friends
- ✓ Retirement
- ✓ Isolation
- ✓ Dementia or other cognitive impairments
- ✓ Chronic illness
- ✓ Financial worries
- ✓ Ease of access to lottery tickets, bingo, and casinos

Symptoms of Problem Gambling among Older Adults

- ✓ Spends more than s/he can afford on gambling
- ✓ Borrows money to gamble
- ✓ Thinks about gambling frequently
- ✓ Feels guilty or ashamed about gambling
- ✓ Hides betting slips, lottery tickets, or gambling money
- ✓ Becomes angry or defensive when asked about gambling habits
- ✓ Neglects responsibilities such as rent, medical visits, or prescription drugs

Sometimes older adults exhibit no outward signs of gambling issues. Yet more than 14,000 people 55 and older in Massachusetts are estimated to have a gambling problem.ⁱⁱⁱ Problem gamblers may:

- ✓ Function well
- ✓ Exhibit no physical symptoms
- ✓ Feel ashamed about their gambling
- ✓ Deny their problem gambling

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WHAT PROVIDERS CAN DO TO HELP:

You can ask some simple questions to assess whether an older person's behavior is healthy or problematic. If an individual's answer is concerning to you, consider referring him/her to one of the gambling resources found in this Update.

You may want to begin by saying “I am concerned about you, so I wonder...”:^{iv}

1. How do you feel when you gamble?
2. Are there activities other than gambling that give you the same pleasure?
3. Do you have friends or family to support you if you feel ill, lonely, or anxious?
4. Do you have enough money to pay for rent, medical care, prescriptions, and food?
5. Are there any special circumstances (e.g. gambling) that prevent you from taking care of your responsibilities (such as rent, your health, etc.)?

Additionally, providers can take steps to discourage problem gambling:

- ✓ Encourage healthy social activities such as book clubs, hobby clubs, movies, or theater.
- ✓ If you offer gambling as a social activity, also provide resources for older adults should a problem arise.
- ✓ Incorporate the gambling questions above into your general intake.
- ✓ If you enjoy gambling, try not to discuss your gambling activities with your clients.

^{iv} Adapted from the Massachusetts Gambling Screen (MAGS).

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GAMBLING RESOURCES & REFERRALS:

Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling:

Provides information, resources, and referrals—including self-help and treatment resources—on problem gambling.

English: 1-800-426-1234;

Spanish: 1-857-383-3558;

Chinese: 1-857-383-3557

TTY: 617-426-1855

www.masscompulsivegambling.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline:

Provides information and referrals regarding substance abuse, as some problem gamblers may also be dealing with substance use and abuse issues.

1-800-327-5050; TTY: 617-536-5872

www.helpline-online.com

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Office of Healthy Aging:

Administers programs that provide opportunities for older adults and people with disabilities to understand and manage their health.

617-624-5070; TTY: 617-624-5992

www.mass.gov/dph and enter “Office of Healthy Aging” into the search box

Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs:

Assists elders and their families with answers to questions about services and opportunities available to seniors and their caregivers in Massachusetts.

1-800-243-4636;

TDD/TTY: 1-800-872-0166

www.mass.gov/eohhs