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Older Adults at Risk for Gambling Problems, Nursing Professor Says

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - As legal gambling options have become prevalent - from state-sponsored lotteries to popular riverboat casinos - a variety of factors combine to make older adults vulnerable to gambling addictions, according to an Illinois Wesleyan University nursing professor.

Cindy Kerber, adjunct assistant professor of nursing, is following her previous research on gambling among college athletes with an investigation of the post-65 age group, for whom "escape" is frequently a motivation to gamble at the same time that gambling losses can be especially serious.

"(Older adults) sometimes have access to large amounts of money, if they cash in retirement accounts. They may have more time available and are looking for something to do that is fun and exciting," says Kerber. "A trip to the casino is popular because it's a social outlet. Casinos market to older adults pretty heavily - they provide them with free meals, hotel stays and medication discounts for going to gamble. And of course there's church bingo, which is popular, and it also tends to make gambling seem innocuous."

While Kerber acknowledges that most older adults who gamble do so in moderation, she says that those who develop gambling problems have less potential to recover from their losses. "A younger person could pick up a second job, or cancel a vacation to recoup the financial loss. Older adults have less flexibility financially," she says.

In addition, Kerber notes that depressed older adults have a higher rate of suicide than any other age group and that pathological gamblers themselves are a higher risk group for suicide. This places an emphasis on early diagnosis and intervention, she says. Yet, research indicates older adults aren't likely to tell their primary care doctors about addictions or behavioral health problems in general, nor do they seek out counselors for help. This, she says, makes awareness among physicians and nurse practitioners especially important.

Kerber uses an acronym, CASINO, to help people remember conditions that may coexist with a gambling addiction. "C" is for cardiovascular disease or high blood pressure; "A" for alcoholism and affective disorders, such as depression and anxiety disorders; "S" for stomach problems, stress and suicide risk; "I" for isolation and insomnia, and "NO" represents no money for food, shelter or medical bills, and no support system. While these difficulties aren't exclusive to gamblers, it may point to those who should be questioned further.

"I would like to encourage doctors and advanced practice nurses to assess for (pathological gambling)," she says. "We're going to have to determine those people who are at highest risk and offer education and treatment options to them."

To discuss older adult gambling with Kerber, contact Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at (309) 556-3181.