



MICAP RECAP

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As Youth Gambling Rises, Addiction Concerns Increase



For the first time, experts and treatment centers that deal with problem gamblers across the country are seeing an increasing number of adolescents who have developed serious gambling problems, according to a report in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

In Connecticut, for instance, it was rare for any treatment center to have clients younger than 18. That's until this year. Now, 11 youngsters are in formal programs getting help.

In Minnesota, a pioneering youth gambling-education group is seeing "a tremendous increase" in schools and youth organizations looking for tools to help kids deal with problem gambling.

And in Washington, experts are calling on

Congress to hold hearings on the issue – in part because more than a dozen gambling shows air on prime-time television in an average week, and none routinely carries warning messages or public-service announcements on "responsible" gambling, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling.

"It is a major, growing issue," says Barbara Raimundo, a mother of a recovering gambling addict who now counsels other parents in Connecticut. "Our youth need major help, and someone has to be willing to step up to the plate before they start getting really devastated."

A key reason for the increase in youth gambling is that it's now seen as "cool." In fact, the

once disreputable pastime that was confined to a handful of shady destinations a quarter century ago is now legal in all but two states, and is touted as glamorous entertainment.

Casinos heavily advertise their lavish, exciting amenities. Celebrities play poker on TV, and poker players become celebrities winning millions of dollars. At the same time, gambling is heavily advertised on the Internet and is easy to access, no matter how old one is.

Research shows that more than 70 percent of kids between 10 and 17 have gambled in the past year, according to the National Council. That's up from 45 percent in 1988. Experts also say they're gambling younger and playing for more money.

And, just as a percentage of adults who gamble are likely to develop a gambling addiction, so, too, are young people. Research shows that as many as 4 to 5 percent of adult gamblers will develop a serious gambling problem. Kids are at three times the risk of adults for developing a problem.

"We know that the earlier you start gambling, the more likely you will be to have a gambling problem. The National Academy of Sciences found that in 1999," says Keith Whyte, executive of the National Council on Problem Gambling in Washington.

But for many parents, whose kids are growing up in an age of drugs and AIDS, gambling is seen as a relatively safe pastime. Teens can be at home, playing a game that's thought of as fun. And for many people, a regular poker night or fundraising casino event at school may present no problems. But experts are concerned that a lack of education about gambling's potential pitfalls could feed an already alarming increase in younger problem gamblers.

"It is a situation where many parents still do assume that it's better for a kid to be gambling than to be out on the streets doing drugs or whatever," says Dr. Rachel Volberg, president of Gemini Research, which specializes in gambling studies in Northampton, Mass.

The primary risk is that kids can get so caught up in the thrill that they begin to gamble regularly. Eventually, they start risking money that

they don't have – and losing it. When that starts, they're called problem gamblers, and the consequences include what doctors diagnose as depression as well as criminal behavior, according to the National Council.

Researchers are also beginning to believe that gambling is a "gateway" activity to riskier behaviors. Indeed, kids who gamble are also much more likely to binge drink, smoke marijuana, skip school, and have unsafe sex, according to several studies cited by the National Council.

Researchers consider gambling as a "gateway" activity to riskier behavior, since kids who gamble are much more likely to binge drink, smoke marijuana, skip school and have unsafe sex.

Experts would like to see media outlets that air gambling events also show public-service announcements or other types of advertisements that talk about gambling's potential health risks, list warning signs, and provide information about responsible gambling – such as setting limits, never gambling during anger or depression, and never gambling on credit.

There are also resources on the Internet for parents and kids who are interested in learning about the risks involved with gambling and the attendant warning signs. The North American Training Institute in Duluth, Minn., has designed a Web magazine for kids to learn about the risks involved with gambling: www.wannabet.org. It also has resources for parents at www.nati.org.

NATI's executive director, Elizabeth George, says it's crucial for parents to learn the warning signs. "If the child talks about gambling as the most exciting and important thing in their life, if it's superseding other things like a girlfriend or hockey practice, or if he is missing other activities because he's gambling, it could be the sign of a problem," says Ms. George.

Other indications of a problem include: lying

about whether they are gambling; using money to gamble that's supposed to be used for other things like a winter jacket; borrowing money to gamble or, in a worst case, stealing it; and letting school-work suffer.

"Parents have to get gambling on their radar screen, they have to say, 'Tell me about your gambling'" says George.

Spring break not quite the same this year

Adults who can afford it have escaped winter weather in the northern part of the United States for the past several months and now it is time for students on spring break to head south.

Bikinis, flip-flops and wet T-shirts remain the attire of choice for tens of thousands of college spring breakers, whose annual migrations to such hot spots as Panama City, Florida, South Padre Island, Texas, and Acapulco, Mexico, has kicked off and will run through early April.

But many of this year's rites of spring will feature another wardrobe component: hard hats.

In the Mexican resort of Cancun, where a Category 4 Hurricane, Wilma, caused catastrophic damage in late October, construction workers are racing to repair hotels, clubs and restaurants and pump sand back on beaches.

By the time the first wave of student sun seekers arrived the last week in February, about 60% of the resort's nearly 28,000 rooms were open, along with such popular night spots as Coco Bongo and Señor Frog's.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans and elsewhere along the Hurricane Katrina-battered Gulf Coast, college volunteers will spend their vacations cleaning and hammering through the auspices of such organizations as Habitat for Humanity and Break Away, a Tallahassee, Florida-based non-profit that arranges alternative student break programs.

About 5,000 students affiliated with Break Away are heading for the Gulf Coast, where the continuing need for relief work has been "a galvanizing point" for campus recruitment efforts, says director Jill Piacitelli. She says 81 schools will be participating in volunteer spring breaks this year, up 15% from 2005.

In Cancun, the annual number of spring breakers has dropped from a high of about 160,000 to



40,000 last year as hoteliers and tourism officials worked to tone down the destination's "Jell-O shots and Jacuzzi's" image.

But this year, "there's been a bit of a reversal . . . for now, they see spring break as a salvation," says Cancun-based Stephen Wright, who runs the website CancunCare.com.

The Pacific resort town of Acapulco, a movie star magnet in the 1950s, has eclipsed Cancun as the top foreign spring break destination, says Mario Ricciardelli of StudentCity.com.

That popularity doesn't seem to have been affected by the city's growing problems with drug-related violent crime, including a recent shootout in downtown Acapulco that left four suspected drug gang members dead and four police officers injured.

"Obviously, in major cities there's crime. That's the reality we live in," says Ricciardelli, who notes that the U.S. State Department has not issued a separate travel advisory for Acapulco. (It does,

however, mention the city's crime as part of its consular information sheet for Mexico.)

Spring breakers "are always looking for someplace new," he adds, "and for now, Acapulco is it."

The Bottom Line: Drinking on an empty stomach makes you drunk faster

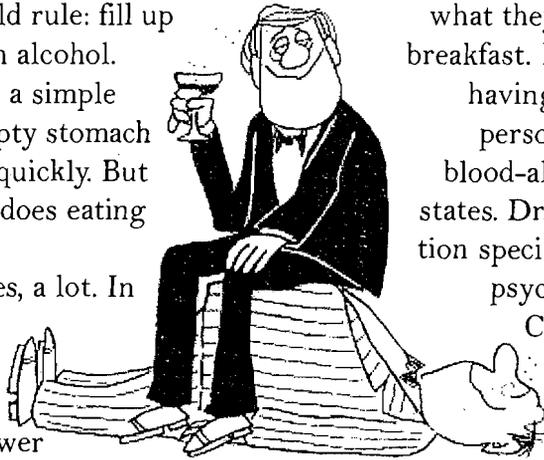
If a night on the town involves alcohol, you have probably heard the age-old rule: fill up with food before filling up with alcohol.

Common wisdom suggests a simple reason, that drinking on an empty stomach will lead to intoxication more quickly. But just how much of a difference does eating before imbibing really make?

According to several studies, a lot. In a recent health column, *The New York Times* cited one such study by a team of Swedish researchers who set out to answer the question by having a group of 10 people consume several drinks on two separate days.

In one case they drank after an overnight fast, and in the other, they drank after they ate a modest breakfast.

On the day the subjects ate, the rate of intoxication was slower, even though the amount of alcohol had not changed. But the subjects also reached significantly lower blood-alcohol levels



overall – on average about 70 percent of what they were on the day they skipped breakfast. In some cases, the study found, having a meal before drinking kept a person from climbing over the legal blood-alcohol limit for driving in most states. Dr. Harris B. Stratyner, an addiction specialist and associate professor of psychiatry at Mount Sinai Medical Center, said it all had to do with metabolism. As soon as alcohol is consumed, he said, the body starts to break it down,

but some is always absorbed directly into the bloodstream. Having food in the stomach – particularly proteins, fats and dense carbohydrates – slows that absorption process.

The things that speed it up are carbonated mixers, like soda, and higher temperatures. (Warm drinks are absorbed faster.) Once alcohol is in your blood, Dr. Stratyner said, neither coffee nor a cold shower will get it out any faster.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Michigan Council on Alcohol Problems seeks to:

1. Broaden the awareness of the religious community, public officials and the Michigan Public to the destructive consequences of alcohol, other drugs, tobacco and gambling, and offer positive solutions.
2. Educate the Michigan Public for responsible controls in the areas of alcohol, other drugs, tobacco and gambling, and
3. Alert and mobilize supporters to any public policy changes related to MICAP's mission.