The Adolescent Gambler: Smokers are at Greater Risk

What this research is about

This study was the first to compare gambling behaviours of adolescents who smoke cigarettes, to those who don’t smoke. High school students in Connecticut were surveyed and those who gambled were classified as low-risk gambler or at-risk gamblers. Their behaviours and attitudes toward gambling were compared between the low-risk and at-risk gamblers for both smokers and non-smokers. The researchers wanted to determine whether adolescent gamblers who smoked would show more serious and problematic gambling behaviours than non-smokers.

What the researcher did

The researchers surveyed over four thousand public high school students in Connecticut in a voluntary, one-day survey. Slightly less than half of the participants reported gambling in the past year, and only these participants were included in the analysis. Past-year gamblers were classified into one of two categories: low-risk gambler or at-risk gambler using a validated measure of pathological gambling. To determine their smoker or non-smoker status, participants who said they smoked regularly now were included as smokers. Those who had never smoked, or only “once or twice” in the past were considered non-smokers. All others (e.g. occasional smokers, or smokers who had quit) were excluded from the study. This reduced the number of study participants to 1591. Participants also completed questionnaires measuring their gambling behaviours, motivations, and attitudes. The researchers also collected information on participants’ age, gender, race, school level and family structure.

What the researcher found

The researcher found that smoking was associated with more severe gambling behaviours in adolescents, compared with non-smoking, just as it has been shown for adults. Both the at-risk and low-risk gamblers who smoked spent more time gambling, gambled in response to anxiety and were less supportive of measures to prevent teen gambling than were their non-smoking peers.

For the at-risk gamblers, smoking was more strongly associated with multiple gambling behaviours. These included gambling at an earlier age, gambling to relieve feelings of pressure, and a perception that their parents approved of gambling. At-risk gamblers...
who smoke regularly also participated in arguably riskier types of gambling, such as slot machines, than at-risk gamblers who don’t smoke. In the low-risk group, smokers were more likely to engage in a wider range of gambling such as betting with a friend, betting on video or arcade games.

How can you use this research?

Since the research found that perceived parental approval of gambling was highest for the at-risk smoking gamblers, educational efforts that communicate the potential harms of adolescent gambling should be targeted at parents of adolescent smokers. Given that both the at-risk and low-risk adolescents who smoked were more likely to buy instant lottery tickets and that they may be purchasing both tobacco and gambling products at the same time, policy measures to curb underage purchasing should target both. The fact that smoking status may possibly be used as a ‘clinical indicator’ of more severe and problematic gambling in adolescents suggests the importance of including smoking cessation in clinical intervention efforts with adolescent gamblers.

About the Researcher

The principal investigator, Dr. Andrea Weinberger of the Yale University School of Medicine (Dept. of Psychiatry) is deputy editor of the Nicotine and Tobacco Research publication. Questions about this article should be addressed to Andrea Weinberger at andrea.weinberger@einstein.yu.edu.

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