

Survey finds no link between teen sex, condoms

New study backs earlier research into birth control

By LAURA MECKLER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Teenagers at high schools where condoms were available were no more likely to have sex than other teens, a study suggests.

The study, published yesterday, backs earlier research on the programs developed in the 1990s to stem the spread of the AIDS virus and reduce teen pregnancy. It says that students in high schools with condom programs were more likely to use condoms, while students in other high schools were more likely to use other forms of birth control.

Overall, there was no difference in pregnancy rates. The study could not determine whether there was an increase in sexually transmitted diseases.

Many conservatives have staunchly opposed condom programs, saying they send the wrong message and encourage and enable teens to have sex before marriage.

Researchers writing in the American Journal of Public Health examined high schools in Massachusetts, where the state Department of Education en-

couraged schools to develop condom programs. In most cases, the condoms were available from the school nurse or from other personnel such as a gym teacher.

The study took a sample of all high schools, comparing students at nine schools that made condoms available with those at 50 schools that did not. The data came from a 1995 survey of students' sexual behavior.

They found students in schools with condom programs were slightly less likely to report having had sexual intercourse than those at other schools. Specifically, 49 percent of students at schools that didn't distribute condoms reported they had engaged in sex, compared with 42 percent at schools that made condoms available.

"The concerns of the small minority of parents who oppose providing condoms or related instruction in schools were not substantiated," wrote lead author Susan Blake and her colleagues at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services.

The study did not compare teenage sexual behavior before and after condom programs were instituted, researchers note, so the study does not prove that the program changed anyone's behavior.

Opponents of the programs cited that weakness in criticizing the study.

"If you look behind the headlines, you'll see this study is much ado about

The study did not compare teens' habits before and after condom programs began, so it does not prove the program altered behavior.

nothing," said a statement from Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative group.

Connor said making condoms available "sends kids the wrong message and gives them a false sense of security that they will be protected." While condoms protect against transmission of HIV, he noted that some diseases can be transmitted during sex even with a condom.

Other researchers also have found that condom programs do not encourage teens to have sex, but it's less clear if they succeed in getting teens to use them, said Douglas Kirby, an expert on teen sexuality at ETR Associates.

He said the controversy surrounding these programs has diminished over time. He guessed that's largely because once the programs are implemented, people accept them.

"When you go and visit some of these schools, as an outsider you think it's really a big thing, and you go in and wander into a health clinic and you see a basket full of condoms, and that's it," Kirby said. "That's what all the hoopla is for."

The Massachusetts study also found that schools offering condoms also were more likely to teach students how to use them properly. Students at schools with condoms also were more likely to have received information about AIDS and the virus that causes it.

The study found that students at schools with condom programs were no more likely than others to say that condoms were easily available, even though they were more likely to use them.

Researchers said it might not have been that making condoms available prompted teens to use them, but communities that were likely to adopt the programs were more likely to support condom use to begin with.

The data on teen sexual behavior came from the 1995 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey. It included interviews with 4,166 students. About one in five was enrolled in a school with a condom-availability program.