

Health Advocates Rally for Sex Education

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PHILADELPHIA -- Public health advocates rallied on Wednesday against President Bush's plan to expand abstinence-only education, calling instead for teaching youngsters about condoms and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

The advocates also criticized an upcoming congressional hearing on whether condoms should carry labels warning that they do not protect against a little known, but widespread, sexually transmitted disease. They fear such warnings would lessen use of condoms.

About 200 people attended the rally at the close of the National STD Prevention Conference, chanting: "Bush get wise, condoms save lives."

Bush has proposed doubling funding to \$270 million for abstinence programs, saying in his State of the Union address in January that abstinence is "the only certain way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases."

Independent researchers studying such programs for the federal government said in a report two years ago that no reliable evidence exists that abstinence programs work.

"The Bush administration needs to fund comprehensive sex education programs," said Lauren Oshman, president of the American Medical Student Association, a co-sponsor of the rally.

The public health advocates also spoke out against a congressional hearing planned Thursday on whether condoms should carry labels warning they do not protect against human papillomavirus, or HPV.

At some point in their lives, more than 50 percent of sexually active Americans will contract HPV, a little known STD that can be transmitted even when condoms are used. Most never have any symptoms and clear the infection without treatment.

Rep. Mark Souder, an Indiana Republican who called the Washington hearing, wants the Food and Drug Administration to uphold a law that says condoms must have "medically accurate" labeling. His spokesman, Martin Green, said Americans need the information to protect against HPV, which can cause cervical cancer in a small number of cases.

"People like Rep. Souder are taking this small piece of the puzzle and running with it, saying condoms don't work ... instead of saying condoms are really good at preventing HIV and other diseases," said Julie Davids, the executive director of CHAMP, a New York-based HIV/AIDS organization.