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## Abstinence education doesn't work, US report shows

By **MAGGIE FOX**, Health & Science Editor

Abstinence-only education programs meant to teach children to avoid sex until marriage failed to control their sexual behavior, according to a U.S. government report. Teenagers who took part in the programs as elementary and middle school students were just as likely to have sex as those who did not take part in them, the survey found. The report, ordered by Congress, was not released by the Health and Human Services Department, but by activists and by California Democratic Rep. Henry Waxman's office. An HHS spokeswoman did not answer a request for a comment. The report revived the debate on government abstinence-only education programs, which are strongly supported by the administration of President George W. Bush.

"For both the program and control group youth, the reported mean age at first intercourse was identical, 14.9 years," says the report, available on the Internet at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/abstinence07/index.htm>.

Teens in both groups were just as likely to use condoms or birth control, the report found -- countering the fears of critics of abstinence-only education, who say children ignorant of how to protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases will simply have more unprotected sex.

For the report, Christopher Trenholm and colleagues at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. interviewed more than 2,000 teenagers with an average age of 16 1/2. They lived in rural and urban communities in Florida, Wisconsin, Mississippi and Virginia. About 1,200 of them had taken part in abstinence-only education programs four to six years before. "Over the last 12 months, 23 percent of both groups reported having had sex and always using a condom; 17 percent of both groups reported

having had sex and only sometimes using a condom; and 4 percent of both groups reported having had sex and never using a condom," the researchers wrote.

### SEVERAL PARTNERS

"Program and control group youth also did not differ in the number of partners with whom they had sex," they added. About 25 percent in both groups had already had sex with three or more partners. "This data supports what a growing body of public health evidence has indicated: Abstinence-only programs don't protect teen health," said Waxman, chairman of the House of Representatives Government Oversight Committee. "In short, American taxpayers appear to have paid over one billion federal dollars for programs that have no impact."

The report said the federal government has spent \$87.5 million annually since 1998 for abstinence-only education programs. Activists said the findings showed that children need more comprehensive education about abstinence, contraception and sex in general. "The vast majority of the public does not see abstinence and contraception as an either/or proposition -- they want teens to be informed of both," Sarah Brown, Executive Director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said in a statement.

"We have been promoting ignorance in the era of AIDS, and that's not just bad public health policy, its bad ethics," added James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth.

But proponents of abstinence-only education said the report just suggested more such education is needed. "To the contrary, the report specifically indicates that programs should continue with changes where necessary to make them more effective, particularly 'promoting support for abstinence among peer networks' as an important feature." said Dr. Gary Rose, president of The Medical Institute.