Dial-up Prevention

Teens text their way to safer sex

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In April, the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) launched the nation's first text-message STD-prevention campaign to reach out and touch 12- to 24-year-olds. (Seventy five percent of 17-year-olds own cell phones.) They text a local number and choose from a menu of options, such as "if ur condom broke," and get automated pointers, with experts' contact info in less than two minutes. Texters pay nothing; the program costs SFDPH a relatively cheap $2,500 per month.

The youngsters constituted 12% of new U.S. HIV diagnoses in 2003, and their AIDS rate rose 37% from 1999 to 2003. In San Francisco, gonorrhea and chlamydia rates among teens are also satellite high. "Youth get most of their sex ed from friends, and it's often inaccurate," says Jacqueline McCright, of the SFDPH. "They are embarrassed to talk to their parents, and many high-risk teens are not in school to get information there." She reports sending 1,200 texts in just the first two weeks, adding that outreach in hot hangouts should pump up the volume. Great call :).

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