

NYC to launch an official city condom, with possible subway theme

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January 25, 2007, 10:52 AM EST

NEW YORK -- Available soon from City Hall: an official New York City condom.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration is focused on reducing rates of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, and part of the strategy is the aggressive promotion of free condoms. Officials are banking on the idea that more people will use condoms if they're wrapped in jazzy packaging.

One idea for the design of the official city condom is a subway theme, with maps and colors of the different lines emblazoned on the wrappers. The health department says a number of possibilities are under consideration.

"Brands work, and people use branded items more than they use non branded items, whether it's a cola or a medicine even," Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden said in an interview. "Brands add value and they increase use."

New York is already a big player in the condom market. The city hands out 1.5 million free condoms each month, or about 18 million a year. Hundreds of organizations get free condoms from the city and distribute them at various locations, including health clinics and advocacy groups, bars, restaurants, nail salons, nightclubs and even prisons.

By comparison, the Los Angeles County health department gives out just over a million condoms per year, according to Peter Kerndt, director of the department's STD program. In Los Angeles, health and advocacy organizations request and then redistribute condoms, and individuals can order up to 10 at a time by calling a hot line.

New York negotiated a deal with the maker of the Lifestyles brand for 4 cents per condom, putting the expense to the city at just \$720,000 annually, according to health officials.

Once the newly-designed condoms are available, city officials hope the distinctive wrapper will enable them to better understand the effectiveness of their distribution program. They plan to do that through the annual community health survey that polls 10,000 New Yorkers by telephone.

"We ask, 'Did you use a condom the last time you had sex?' And once this is launched, the next time we ask that question, of those people who say yes, we'll say, 'What did the wrapper look like?'" Frieden said. "And if they describe our wrapper, then we'll know that they would have used our condom."

Right now, it is difficult to know. The free condoms given out by the city are wrapped in the red packaging from the Lifestyles brand, a product of Ansell Healthcare Products LLC. The company declined to discuss its contract with the city and referred all questions to the health department.

The number of condoms distributed by the city multiplied several times over after the health department launched its online ordering system in 2005. Individuals cannot order there, but any other type of organization or venue can request unlimited free condoms through the Web site.

The Duplex, a bar in the West Village, offers free condoms in a bowl at its entryway and on a table by the restrooms. Day manager C.T. Cook said they order about 3,000 per month from the city.

"It's very important to show that we encourage safe sex and for people to be responsible," he said. "If you're under the influence, you might make poor judgements and act without thinking, so if it's easier to obtain condoms, this can probably help prevent mistakes."

Gay Men's Health Crisis, an non-profit dedicated to fighting AIDS, orders half a million free condoms each year, spokeswoman Lynn Schulman said. It is one of about 800 groups that did so last year.

The group offers the condoms in bowls scattered throughout their organization's offices, hands them out at the annual AIDS walk, and gives them to establishments like gay bars.

Widespread free distribution started after Frieden became health commissioner in 2002 and discovered that the city's STD disease clinics were limiting each patient to just a small number.

"I thought that was nuts \_ of all the people you'd like to have an unlimited supply of condoms, it's people who have an STD," said Frieden. "Condoms work, they're just not where they need to be as often as they need to be."

There is now even a bowl of condoms outside Frieden's office.

More than 100,000 New Yorkers are living with HIV and AIDS. And city officials are troubled by one subcategory in particular \_ the 1,000 or so people each year who find out they have AIDS, but never knew they even had HIV. AIDS remains the third-leading cause of death among New Yorkers under 65.

It can take years for AIDS to develop in HIV-infected people, which means they can unknowingly infect others during that time if they don't know they have the virus and aren't using condoms.

New York officials don't yet have their own data on the effectiveness of their free condom program, but many experts say large-scale free distribution is a crucial tool of public health policy.

Dr. Thomas Farley, a former state health official for Louisiana and now a professor at Tulane University's School of Public Health, oversaw a condom-distribution program in the 1990s. For the first three years of the initiative, condoms were provided free at health clinics, bars, restaurants, liquor stores, supermarkets \_ everywhere possible.

During that time, surveys found that condom use increased substantially. Then, during a budget shortfall, condoms were offered at 8 cents each to those venues, which could then sell them for 25 cents each. Condom use decreased dramatically.

Health officials reinstated the free program, and condom use rose again.

"The conclusion was that condoms needed to be free and freely available," he said. "As a public service, it's much less expensive than the cost of HIV treatment, which is heavily government-subsidized."

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