Log on for some shut-eye

By DAVID CURRY

THE INTERNET keeps some people up late at night, but new research shows it might also be able to provide a way to help insomniacs get a good night's sleep.

An experiment at the University of Virginia using a web-based program called SHUTi (Sleep Healthy Using The Internet) found that sleep for insomniacs improved significantly over nine weeks.

The overall level of insomnia severity for the insomniacs who used SHUTi fell to a level that was not "clinically significant", while the control group recorded almost no change.

Dr Lee Ritterband, speaking at the John Curtin School of Medical Research, said the subjects themselves recorded a marked improvement.

"At the end of the experiment, we had a major improvement in perceived insomnia as well as actual insomnia," he said.

Six months after the experiment the subjects had retained most of the sleep improvement.

Dr Ritterband is an associate professor at the University of Virginia Health System and the director of the behavioral health and technology program area. He has degrees in clinical psychology and computer science/technology.

The SHUTi program is based on the cognitive behaviour therapy normally offered face-to-face by clinicians. It provides information, such as the need to avoid stimulants, large meals and alcohol before going to bed, and advice such as getting up when unable to sleep for more than 20 minutes and the need to develop rituals around going to bed.

The trial program uses questionnaires, sleep diaries, and other interactive ways of tailoring information for each insomniac.

"Internet interventions mean you don't have to go to the doctor, you can do it in your own time, you can do it in your home, and you don't have to have skilled care near you," Dr Ritterband said.

Medication, while a good short-term solution for insomnia, was not ideal for the longer term.

"What happens is tolerance builds up, so you take more medication. But tolerance builds up again, so you take more and more, and then you realise you're taking too much, so you stop," Dr Ritterland said.

This causes withdrawal, and then you have all the consequences of rebound, so you go back on the medication."

Dr Ritterband said there was an "epidemic of silent sufferers" of insomnia that affected about a third of the population.

In the United States, insomnia was estimated to cost $41 billion annually in lost productivity.

It was also estimated to have contributed directly to 58,000 vehicle accidents.

Insomniacs were typically divided into those who had trouble going to sleep at night, those who woke up during the middle of the night and struggled to get back to sleep, and those who woke too early.

Dr Ritterland said because the experiment only used a small sample of 45 subjects, more research using much larger samples would be required to confirm the effectiveness of the internet program.

This was likely to take several years, he said.

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