THE number of people seeking help for sleep problems has gone up significantly over the years, and hospitals have had to bump up their facilities to treat them.

The team of 10 specialists and 15 support staff at the Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) sleep clinic handled 1,636 patients in 2004, and 2,546 in 2007 - a 55-per-cent jump over four years.

The number of in-patient sleep studies, in which patients spend the night hooked up to machines that monitor their sleep patterns, has also gone up by more than half, from 701 in 2004 to 1,106 in 2007.

At the National University Hospital, the number of such tests tripled from 156 in 2002 to 452 last year.

It is not cheap to go through this kind of monitoring. Depending on the class of ward, the bill is usually between $500 and $1,500, so monitoring is recommended only for patients with serious sleep problems.

These include having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or having breathing problems like snoring or sleep apnoea.

Sleep disorders can have their roots in stress, shift-work, obesity or medical conditions, and are not confined to adults.

KK Women's and Children's Hospital's (KKH) paediatric sleep laboratory, which treats children 16 years and younger, has had to double its number of beds from two to four.

Dr Jenny Tang, who heads respiratory medicine at KKH, said its sleep clinic treats over 1,000 children with sleep problems each year.

About a fifth of them suffer from obstructive sleep apnoea, in which breathing is cut off repeatedly during sleep, causing arousal, although the child does not actually wake up.

These children, who also usually snore, tend to be fat; more boys than girls have the problem. Toddlers with this problem may be hyperactive in the day.

The National University Hospital has also seen a climbing number of children with sleep disorders; more than 100 had serious problems last year, said paediatric sleep specialist Chng Seo Yi.

Awareness of sleep problems is still low here, even among general practitioners, say sleep doctors. The Singapore Sleep Society recently published a book to fill this information gap for GPs.

Dr Lim Li Ling, president of the society, said sleep problems have to be identified and treated, since the lack of sleep raises one's risk of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, depression and heart disease.
One of the first effects of the lack of sleep is impaired brain function, said Dr Lim, who is also director of SGH's sleep disorder clinic.

While the individual can function reasonably well physically, cognitive function and insight may go downhill, she said.

Children, even toddlers, can also suffer sleep deprivation.

Associate Professor Stacey Tay of the National University of Singapore and her team did a study on sleep patterns of pre-schoolers here and found them getting on average one to two hours less sleep than children in Europe.

This is worrying because lack of sleep can make children obese, raise their risk of infections and accidents as well as sap their ability to learn.

Adults and children who get enough sleep tend to think faster, absorb more and make better decisions, Dr Lim said.

**Obstructive Sleep Apnoea:**

A potentially dangerous problem in which breathing stops for several seconds, rousing the patient enough to start him breathing again.

This can happen 20 to 30 times an hour, disrupting rest and leaving the patient exhausted the next day.

**Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS) & Periodic Limb Movement Disorder (PLMD):**

The two often go together. RLS patients cannot lie still; they feel an irresistible urge to move their arms or legs while lying down.

Some feel a tingly or creepy sensation in their limbs, which is relieved by movement.

Those with PLMD involuntarily jerk their limbs while asleep. Frequent jerks disrupt their sleep, so they wake up unrefreshed.

**Insomnia:**

This is difficulty in getting to sleep coupled with waking up too early. It can be induced by stress.

It is fairly common in teenagers, whose body clocks are changing, causing them to want to go to bed late and rise later.
☐ **Sleep Walking:**

This is more common in children and is often associated with bed-wetting.

The child remains in deep sleep while walking or doing other things.

In adults, it may be caused by lack of sleep or triggered by some medicines.

☐ **Narcolepsy:**

A disorder which causes the person to fall asleep suddenly, usually when doing something monotonous. It can even occur in the middle of a meal or conversation.