

Seniors use brain training software to sharpen their minds

February 27 2009, By Bob Moos

Angie Rogers wants to stay fit enough to ride her motorcycle well into her 60s, so the 54-year-old Sachse, Texas, resident is working out on her computer almost every day.

The brain training software on her computer keeps her mentally sharp, which she hopes will help her remain a safe driver as she becomes older.

"I've already seen an improvement," she said. "My field of vision has broadened. I now notice things while driving that I had missed before."

The new software is part of a \$225 million-a-year brain fitness industry that experts expect will show explosive growth even during this recession. By 2015, the industry should reach \$2 billion in annual sales, predicts Alvaro Fernandez, chief executive of SharpBrains, a market research company. The growth will come from computer-savvy boomers and seniors eager to stay not just physically fit, but also mentally alert as they age, he said.

At the moment, there's particular interest in Posit Science's new InSight software because it says it can keep older adults safe behind the wheel. Though older adults have fewer accidents than younger people because they drive less, they're more likely to die or suffer serious injuries. Allstate Insurance has invited some policyholders and other older drivers to try InSight so researchers can evaluate whether the software reduces accidents. Depending on the results, the auto insurer says it may expand the pilot project and offer premium discounts to drivers who take the

brain training.

"InSight helps people see more and react faster to what's around them, like a child wandering into the street," said Posit Science chairman Jeff Zimman.

The software consists of five gamelike exercises that train users to spot or track objects that flash before them or move about the computer screen. In the Jewel Diver exercise, for example, users become deep-sea explorers who must search for sunken treasure amid fast-swimming schools of fish. InSight takes about 30 to 40 hours to complete. Users usually go through the set of exercises in hourlong sessions over a couple of months.

A big market for the software, Zimman said, is retirement communities that are setting up "brain gyms," with brain-training computer exercises, for residents.

Christian Care Center, a senior community in Mesquite, Texas, recently graduated its first class of "brain fitness" students and has a long waiting list for future classes.

The community is looking at adding InSight to complement its brain gym's first computer program, which aims to improve listening and memory. "Our residents are psyched up about brain fitness," said retirement living director Debbie Wheelan. "It stands to reason. The sharper your mind is, the happier you are."

Rogers is one of the Christian Care employees who are testing the InSight software and finding that playing the computer games is more fun than work.

"It took me a little while to catch on because I don't play video games,

but I've become an old hand," she said. "I've logged about 50 hours so far." Individuals and insurance companies have been the other big consumers of InSight in its first few months on the market, Zimman said. Gaylan Burket, a 55-year-old occupational therapist who lives in Plano, Texas, says she bought the software online after learning about it at a health fair.

InSight is now part of her evening routine.

After dinner, she sits down at her home computer and challenges herself with exercises such as Bird Safari, Master Gardener and, her favorite, Road Tour.

"It's pretty clear that the people who age most gracefully are the ones who stay engaged and use their minds," Burket said. "I intend to belong to that group."

InSight retails for \$395 for a single user and \$495 for two users, though it's available through other organizations, such as insurers and adult education programs, for less.

For its pilot project, Allstate offered the software at no cost to more than 100,000 policyholders in Pennsylvania who are between 50 and 75.

Researchers will compare the accident rates of that group with those of drivers who haven't completed the brain training, said company spokeswoman Krissy Posey.

"This program has the potential to improve what could be the most important piece of auto safety equipment - the mind of the driver," she said. It could be the next big step in auto safety, after seat belts, air bags and better bumpers, Zimman said. Previous scientific studies have found that the technology behind InSight reduces dangerous driving maneuvers

almost 40 percent, he said.

"In fact, those studies have shown that brain training can cut the risk of a crash in half," he said. Fernandez of SharpBrains says computer software that promises safer driving will become one of the stronger sectors in the emerging brain fitness industry. Today, only one in seven licensed drivers is 65 or older. But by 2030, when the last of the boomers turn 65, the proportion will be one in four. "If the Allstate test this spring validates the earlier studies," Fernandez said, "older motorists' demand for brain training will be enormous."

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