

Seizure Dogs

They're companions. They're an alarm system. They're helpers, protectors, and service providers. They may even be able to sense in advance when someone they're close to is going to have an epileptic seizure. So-called seizure dogs can be all these things - and more.

America's interest in seizure dogs began in the mid-1980's, when a woman with epilepsy who was taking part in a Washington state prison project involving dogs discovered that one of the dogs seemed to know when she was going to have a seizure. The news media picked up the story, and the phrase "seizure dogs" was born. The Lifetime television drama, "Within These Walls," is based in part on this experience.

Seizure Dogs Help in Many Ways

Now the term is used in a broader sense, and covers a variety of activities associated with epilepsy. Some dogs have been trained to bark or otherwise alert families when a child has a seizure while playing outside or in another room. Some dogs learn to lie next to someone having a seizure to prevent injury. Others are even said to be able to activate alarm systems. On the other hand, some dogs are frightened by seizures and have to be reassured and trained to deal with them calmly.

Dogs that are trained to respond in various ways when people have a seizure are no different from other service dogs. When the question of seizure prediction comes up, however, it's a different story. Most people who report having dogs with this ability say that it develops over time and comes as a surprise to both the owner and the family.

In 1998, Roger Reep, Ph.D., an associate professor in the department of physiological sciences at the University of Florida, surveyed 77 people between the ages of 30 and 60 who had epilepsy. The survey asked about their quality of life, medical status, attitudes toward pets, ownership of dogs, and their pets' behavior prior to and during a seizure. Most of the people responding to the survey had epilepsy for a long time (average: 25 years); more than half had at least one seizure per month.

Most said they had dogs for companionship. In interviews following the survey, 3 out of the 31 felt that their dogs seemed to know when they were going to have a seizure (10 percent). Another 28 percent said their dogs stayed with them when they had a seizure.

Dr. Reep reported his findings at the 1998 National Conference of the Epilepsy Foundation. He concluded that reports of seizure-alerting behavior in dogs should be viewed as credible, but with caution. According to his research, the behavior seems to occur spontaneously and may occur in as many as one in ten situations when the owner is having at least one seizure per month. In his survey, no particular breed appeared to be better at sensing an oncoming seizure than any other.

Researchers Train Several Dogs To Warn of Seizures

Dr. Stephen W. Brown, a British neuropsychiatrist and epilepsy specialist, and Val Strong, a behavioral scientist and animal trainer, reported in 1999 in the European Journal of Epilepsy Seizure that, working with people with epilepsy and dogs together, they were able to train some of the dogs to warn of seizures.

The training was based on reward-based operant conditioning - that is, the dogs got a reward every time their owners had seizures. "After a while those dogs that are going to be able to act as seizure-assistance



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dogs start to alert and expect their reward before the person's had the seizure," Dr. Brown said. The dogs he was training were sometimes able to give warning as much as 15 to 45 minutes before the actual seizure occurred. The way the dogs behaved took different forms, from pawing in a special way to simply approaching the person and barking. Could this kind of training make people more likely to have seizures in response to something that looks like a warning? Not according to Dr. Brown. In fact, in his study group, the actual number of seizures went down.

Public interest in the seizure dog phenomenon has created a demand for information about how to get a dog with these various talents, especially the ability to predict seizures. While some people have been very pleased with their new canine friends, others have been disappointed. The Epilepsy Foundation recommends that people take great care in reviewing trainer claims and results, especially when there is a significant fee.

Source:

Epilepsy Foundation, epilepsy.com

References:

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Domesti-Pups: Domesti-PUPS mission is to improve the quality of life for persons with special needs through the assistance of animals and to promote awareness through education. Domesti-PUPS provides service dogs for persons with disabilities, pet therapy programs, classroom dogs and educational programs. Domesti-PUPS is a 501(c)3 volunteer based organization headquartered in Lincoln, Nebraska. Tel: 866.515.7877; Website: domesti-pups.org

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