



Seizure Response Dogs

A topic that has gained media attention and the interest of many people are service dogs who could assist people with seizures. This has generated a rise in the number of people with epilepsy wishing to obtain such a dog for themselves or a family member. Unfortunately, some of the information distributed by various media sources has been inaccurate and this has led to unrealistic expectations.

There are service dogs specifically trained to help someone who has seizures. These are often called seizure response dogs, seizure assistance dogs, seizure alert dogs, or seizure dogs. Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. Two types are generally defined. These are:

Seizure Response Dog (SRD): This type of dog is trained to perform specific behaviours during a seizure. These behaviours could include activating an alert/emergency call system, barking for help, or bringing a phone to the person.

Seizure Alert Dog (SAD): This type of dog demonstrates specific behaviours prior to a seizure. It is therefore implied that a SAD can anticipate seizures. *Contrary to popular belief, seizure alert dogs cannot be trained to detect oncoming seizures. While it is true that some dogs seem to be able to sense their owner's seizures before the onset, this is rare.*

Frequently Asked Questions:

Who would be best suited for a seizure response dog?

Different programs and trainers may have different intake specifications. The Seizure Response Dog Guide program from the Lions Foundation of Canada states that a person must:

- Be 14 years or older
- Have a minimum of one seizure per month
- Be physically and cognitively capable of participating in the ongoing training process
- Be able to independently command and handle their Seizure Response Dog Guide
- Be able to meet the emotional, physical, and financial needs of their Seizure Response Dog Guide
- Be in a stable home environment
- Have no other dog in the home (other types of pets may also not be allowed)

Having a service dog is a legal, moral, and financial commitment for the life of the dog. Careful consideration must be given to these commitments before accepting the responsibilities of having a service dog. Having a service dog is different than having a pet. Service dogs must follow strict commands and this behaviour must also be practiced by those who live with or are in close contact with the person. Ongoing training and behaviour reinforcement is necessary.

How are seizure response dogs trained?

Depending on the person, the dogs are trained to react to obvious cues. This includes falling or convulsions. The person falling or convulsing would be the dog's cue to start barking or demonstrate other behaviours. Seizure alert dogs cannot be trained. This is considered to be an innate ability.



Is it possible to train my dog to be a seizure response dog?

The majority of dogs do not have the temperament to be a service dog let alone have the innate ability to sense a seizure. There are some anecdotal reports that claim that a family pet may develop the ability to respond to or to anticipate seizures. However there have been no subjective studies that also take into account things such as false alarms or EEG verification to determine whether it was a seizure or potentially another behaviour. Becoming a certified service dog trainer entails many years of training and experience. Unless you have your dog certified as an official service dog by a certified trainer, it will not be have the privileges that other service dogs typically have. For instance, this may include taking the dog on the bus, into schools, or into stores.

How could a dog tell if a seizure is about to occur?

It is not known how a dog can sense an impending seizure but it is believed that the dog detects subtle changes in a person's body language or behaviour before a seizure and this is the trigger. The theory of a dog "smelling" a seizure in advance is scientifically unproven and highly unlikely.

A dog might go through a number of actions that are different from its usual activities if it senses that its owner is going to have a seizure. Pawing, circling, and barking directly at the person have been reported. However, there is no guarantee that the dog will alert the person of an oncoming seizure.

Can a dog be trained to recognize absence (petit mal) seizures?

Seizure response dogs will generally not be able to recognize these types of seizures due to the lack of obvious change in physical behaviour.

How can someone get a seizure response dog?

If you are looking for a seizure response dog, it is very important to have the dog trained by a certified assistance dog trainer that specializes in training service dogs for people with seizures. A reputable and free program in Canada is the Seizure Response Dog Guide program operated by the Lions Foundation of Canada. Other organizations and individuals who train seizure response dogs can be found by searching the internet.

How does the Seizure Response Dog Guide program from the Lions Foundation work?

The dogs are trained to perform a set of basic skills that are useful to all handlers. Some of the training is also tailored to meet the specific needs of their future handler. The person and the dog train and live together in a facility in Oakville in Ontario for two to four weeks. For more information, please contact them at:

Lions Foundation of Canada
Seizure Response Dog Program
1-800-768-3030
152 Wilson St.
Oakville, ON L6K 0G6
www.dogguides.com

Benefits of pet ownership:

For some people, stress can increase the frequency of their seizures. It has been shown in numerous studies that animals can lower stress levels. Therefore the presence of a pet in the life of a person with epilepsy could potentially reduce seizure frequency by lowering the person's stress level.

In conclusion:

Although seizure response or alert dogs could offer a "feeling of comfort" to a person with epilepsy or their caregiver(s), there are no substantial scientific studies that show how their behaviours would protect a person from the negative aspects of seizures – rather than just the psychological aspects. Seizure response dogs could allow people a greater feeling of safety and independence. However this does not necessarily mean that a person will be safer or be able to have greater independence. It is important to have a realistic expectation about what a service dog can and can't do. For information about electronic and other devices that could detect and potentially protect someone during a seizure, please see our information sheet titled, Medical Identification and Safety Devices.

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