Seizure alert dogs

A seizure alert dog is a dog that is trained to respond when someone with epilepsy has a seizure. These dogs are trained by authorised training providers. An approved assistance dog is legally allowed in public places.

Seizure alert dogs are not suitable for everyone. They require a commitment from their handler (the person with epilepsy), and they can be expensive to train and keep. Seizure alert dogs can be great company; however, they are not pets. They are trained to act in a service and support role.

What can seizure alert dogs do?

Seizure alert dogs can be trained to perform a variety of tasks, including:

- lying next to someone having a seizure to prevent an injury
- placing their body between the handler and the floor to break a fall
- staying with the handler during a seizure to provide support and comfort
- activate a device to alert a designated person that a seizure is occurring
- alert family members to a seizure by barking.

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Not all dogs can be trained as seizure alert dogs. There is also no guarantee that a dog can be successfully trained to perform all of these tasks. More research is needed into how effective seizure alert dogs can be. Issues such as the trainer's skill, the breed of the dog, and the handler's commitment all impact a dog's success. People who have successfully used a seizure alert dog say that they achieved the following:

- increased independence
- improved quality of life
- companionship.

Questions to ask before applying for a seizure alert dog

How long does a seizure alert dog stay with the individual?

Most seizure alert dogs have a working life of eight to nine years. Once the dog retires, they either remain with the person as a pet or find a new home within the person's support network.

Am I prepared for the commitment of having a seizure alert dog?

A seizure alert dog is a working animal, and you must be prepared to commit to the dog's role and needs. You need to carefully consider whether a dog will suit your goals, lifestyle and living situation. As well as feeding, exercising, immunising, and having regular veterinary checks, you also need to be consistent with the dog's training and management plan.

Am I prepared for the added attention that a seizure alert dog will bring in a public setting?

Partnering with a seizure alert dog can lead to increased public attention. Handlers and training organisations have noted that members of the public will stop and ask questions. Some questions may be personal ones, such as enquiries about why the person needs an assistance dog.

For parents or guardians

When a child is using a seizure alert dog, the parent usually assumes the handler's responsibility. So, an important consideration is whether a parent has the time to be responsible for the dog.

Is my family ready to commit to a seizure alert dog?

If the dog will be living in a family setting, it is essential to consider the commitment that other family members will need to make. They may need to help care for the dog at times. They must also agree to:

- not interfere with the dog's training or the work
- follow set rules and expectations about the dog's behaviour
- respect the bond between the handler and the dog.

Can seizure alert dogs go into any public space?

All assistance dogs must pass a Public Access Test (PAT) to ensure that access to public spaces, events and services is guaranteed. PAT is a set of standards determined by Assistance Dogs International.
The test reviews the dog's training level and acceptable standards of hygiene and behaviour.

Following successful completion of the PAT, the dog will be given an identity card. If asked, this card must be shown as proof that the dog is an assistance dog. Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, approved assistance dogs are guaranteed access to all public places in Australia.

What is the cost and time associated with a seizure alert dog?

Training a seizure alert dog can cost up to $40,000. It is also a large time commitment as it can take up to two years to train them.

What is the difference between a therapy dog and an assistance dog?

A **therapy dog** provides emotional support to either an individual or a group. They are often used in hospitals, schools, and aged care settings to provide support and stress relief. Therapy dogs do not have Public Access rights and can not go into shopping centres or on public transport. They can only go where a pet dog would typically be able to go.

An **assistance dog** provides specialised assistance for a specific disability. These dogs mustn't be distracted or interrupted by others while they are working. These dogs do have Public Access rights and can go anywhere with their owner. In the USA, an assistance dog is called a service dog.

Can a handler use their own dog?

In some cases, a handler may be able to use their own dog. This will depend on the breed and age of the dog and its suitability to be trained. It will also involve working with a professional trainer from a reputable organisation.

Which organisations can train seizure alert dogs?

Seizure alert dogs require specific training by specialist organisations. The trainer needs to understand the handler's needs and goals and any particular family requirements. Several not-for-profit organisations train seizure alert dogs. If you are interested in having a seizure alert dog, it is a good idea to contact some of these organisations and find out about their pricing, processes and wait times. Some organisations have a wait time of up to 18 months.

Other resources

Information about PAT standards can be found at:

- **www.assistancedogsinternational.org**

Epilepsy support

The National Epilepsy Support Service (NESS) is available Mon – Sat, 9:00am – 7:00pm (AEST) to provide support and information across Australia. Phone: 1300 761 487. Email: support@epilepsysmart.org.au

Lived experience

We recognise all people living with epilepsy and the impact it has on their lives. We take a moment to acknowledge the lived experience they have shared with us. In sharing their stories, we acknowledge the strength and resilience people living with epilepsy have shown in the face of not getting a fair go.

A medical note

The information contained in this publication provides general information about epilepsy. It does not provide specific advice. Specific health and medical advice should always be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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