

Seizure Assistance Dogs

Assistance dogs, or service dogs, have been used for many years for people with a visual or hearing impairment. In more recent times, their roles have expanded, and dogs have been trained and used for conditions such as Autism, PTSD, mental health and Epilepsy.

Assistance dogs can transform the lives of their human partners with physical and/or mental disabilities by serving as their companion, helper, aide, best friend and close member of their family.



What types of Seizure Assistance Dogs are there?

There are two types of seizure assistance dogs. Seizure Alert Dogs and Seizure Response Dogs. However, a seizure alert dog can be trained to respond in the event of a seizure, so has both skills.

Seizure Alert Dogs

Seizure alert dogs are born with the amazing ability to detect impending seizures and give a warning to that person. Seizure detection cannot be trained, it is a natural instinct. This pre-seizure warning gives the person time to take precautions such as lying down or leaving crowded environments. It can also help to prevent serious injuries.

If a dog is alerting to seizures it can be trained in a way to alert its owner of an oncoming seizure and respond to the owners needs before, during, and after a seizure.

By having the confidence of knowing when a seizure may occur, seizure alert dogs can give people with epilepsy greater confidence to go out and have increased independence.

Seizure Response Dogs

Seizure Response Dogs are assistance dogs trained to help people with epilepsy by means of performing tasks to respond to a seizure. This can include activating an alarm, finding someone to help, retrieving a phone, and protecting or stimulating the person during a seizure. As a person recovers from a seizure, the dog can retrieve medications, act as a support to help them up and provide comfort. Each situation is different, so the dog is trained to work with what suits their owner with epilepsy.

Seizure response dogs cannot be trained to predict seizure activity. However, over time, some may develop an ability to alert their owner of an oncoming seizure, but this behaviour is not guaranteed to develop.

How do they work?

There is no certainty about what cue a dog uses to predict a seizure. The dog may be able to give a useful warning of a seizure from a few seconds to an hour before a seizure occurs. Studies (1) have reported these dogs alerting to both focal and tonic clonic seizures, but there may be a broader range (which hasn't yet been studied).



How do they work? Continued...

Seizure alert dogs can assist their owner in many ways, including:

- Displaying alert behaviours before a seizure occurs, such as licking the hand or pacing (this is often a natural instinct also)
- Remaining close to its owner during a seizure to prevent injuries

In response, they can be trained to help and raise the alarm by:

- Alerting a caregiver, family member or emergency response system
- Retrieving a telephone, alert device or medication
- Opening a door or turning on a light

Unexpected benefits

It has been suggested that as well as doing the tasks they have been trained for, seizure assistance dogs can improve the psychosocial health of their owners by reducing anxiety, depression and feelings of loneliness as well as increasing their social support, self-esteem and general quality of life. (2)

Some people have reported that gaining the ability to predict their seizures has allowed them to participate in more activities and has reduced some of the fear associated with the condition, along with better perceptions of health, increased independence and feelings of safety. (1,2)

It's possible that all these factors combined can have a positive effect on seizures. In fact, results from 5 studies suggest subjective benefits of seizure-dogs, include less seizures, and improved quality of life. (1)

There is increasing evidence that dogs in general have a beneficial effect on their owners' health by enhancing physical activity, social contacts, or by providing an anti-depressive effect.(3) Additionally, assistance dogs have a positive influence on the well-being, self-esteem, and community integration of people with disabilities. Assistance dogs may help to minimise the risk of SUDEP and have been reported to react to the medical emergencies of their owners. (4)

Can owners take their assistance dogs into all public places?

Yes. Owners of assistance dogs have the right to take their animals into all public places and onboard public transport. The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person with a disability who is using an assistance dog.

Assistance dogs may not be permitted where the public is not permitted or where there is a public health risk e.g. intensive care units in hospitals, food preparation areas, private residences.



If you want to fly with your dog, you will need to contact the airlines directly to find out their specific requirements and if in-cabin travel with your dog is possible. The requirements may vary from airline to airline.

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NATIONAL EPILEPSY LINE

1300 37 45 37

Available in all Australian states and territories from 9am to 5pm seven days a week



How do I get a Seizure Assistance Dog?

Training assistance dogs is lengthy, complicated and costly and there can be waiting lists of up to two years. Most programs receive financial support so they can provide assistance dogs at a low cost or no cost to the client. You will need to ask each program about their fees. There may be an opportunity to get this funded through NDIS if you meet the criteria. See [NDIS Assistance Animals](#) in relation to funding.

There are many different organisations that train assistance dogs, but only a limited number train seizure assistance dogs. Go to [Assistance Dogs International](#) to find an organisation and click Members Search.

Using my own dog

Some people find their own dog or puppy is naturally alerting owners to seizures. It may be possible to have them trained by an approved trainer, tested (Public Access Test) and certified to meet the requirements of an assistance dog. Not all dogs are suitable for this type of work or training. Your dog always needs to be under effective control and hygienic (well groomed, toileting on command etc). Your dog must not be aggressive, anxious, easily distracted or easily startled. The training organisation can conduct a detailed assessment and let you know.

Different states and territories have their own legislation relating to assistance dogs.

Who can I contact?

If you think an assistance dog might help you or your child, apply for an assistance dog via an assistance dog organisation. Unfortunately, there is no national register of assistance dogs and different states have different programs.

Search [Assistance Dogs International](#) to find a list of accredited training programs in Australia and New Zealand

At the time of writing this factsheet, Epilepsy Action Australia are aware of these organisations that may help with training a seizure assistance dog:

[Righteous Pups Australia](#)

[Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia](#)

[A.W.A.R.E Dogs](#)

It is best to do your own research as there may be other organisations that can help.

Please click on the following links for information in your state:

[Australia Capital Territory](#)

[Tasmania](#)

[New South Wales](#)

[Victoria](#)

[Queensland](#)

[Western Australia](#)

[South Australia](#)

if you live in Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory or Northern Territory or contact your state or territory government as there is currently no formal system of accreditation or registration.



Owning an assistance dog

Having an assistance dog is a commitment for the life of the dog. Dogs depend on you for love, attention, boundaries, training, food and shelter. They are part of the family but are also a financial commitment. Careful consideration must be given to these commitments before accepting the responsibilities of having an assistance dog.

Owning an assistance dog is different to having a pet. Assistance dogs must follow strict commands and this behaviour must also be practiced by those who live with or are in close contact with the dog owner. Ongoing training and behaviour reinforcement is necessary.



References:

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- 2 Strong, V., Brown, S., Huyton, M., Coyle, H. (2002) Effect of trained Seizure Alert Dogs[®] on frequency of tonic-clonic seizures, *Seizure*, Vol 11, Iss 6, Pg 402-405, <https://doi.org/10.1053/seiz.2001.0656>
- 3 Camfield C, Breau L, Camfield P. Impact of pediatric epilepsy on the family: a new scale for clinical and research use. *Epilepsia* 2001;42: 104-112
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