Seizure Alert Dogs



A seizure alert dog is one that has been trained to respond to a seizure in someone who has epilepsy.

Epilepsy New Zealand does not provide assistance dogs, but there are organisations that do. Please scroll to the bottom of the page for information on agencies that may be able to support you.

A seizure alert dog is one that has been trained to respond to a seizure in someone who has epilepsy. These dogs can be trained as an assistance dog, through an approved training provider, for people who experience seizures. An approved assistance dog is protected under law to be used in public places. Further information can be found on the Companion Animals website

Currently, there is little large-scale research regarding the efficacy of seizure alert dogs, but it is hoped that in time more research will be undertaken. Existing research reports are mixed and success often comes down to a range of factors including the skill of the trainer, differences in dog breed and commitment from the handler.

Those who have had a successful outcome report that their seizure alert dog enhanced their quality of life, increased independence, was therapeutic and a good companion.

Seizure alert dogs are not suitable for everyone, require considerable commitment from their handler and caregivers and there are costs associated with training and maintaining them. Seizure alert dogs, while a companion to the person, are not pets but 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 at the beginning of the of a seizure

– Staying with the handler during a seizure to provide support and comfort

– Activating a device, to alert a designated person that a seizure is occurring.

But, as noted earlier, there is no guarantee that a dog can be successfully trained to perform all of these tasks because of the array of factors which can influence outcomes.

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT SEIZURE ALERT DOGS:

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

Most seizure alert dogs have a working life of 8-9 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 that having a seizure alert dog requires?

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. In addition to feeding, exercising, immunising and having regular veterinary checks, you also need to be consistent in 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. A potential handler and any involved caregivers need to determine whether they will be able to cope with this attention and have a strategy for what level of personal information they are willing to disclose. At other times the attention may not be related to the handler but involve questions about the dog, its breed and name.

For parents or guardians – Am I prepared to be the seizure alert dog's handler?

When a child is using a seizure alert dog, the responsibility for acting as a handler is usually assumed by the parent. An important consideration is whether a parent has the time to take on the responsibility of this animal care and management role.

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

If the dog will be living in a family setting, it is important to consider the commitment that other family members will need to make. They may need to assist in caring for the dog at times which may include: respecting the handler's relationship with the dog; agreeing not to interfere with the dog's training or the work it performs; adhere to rules and expectations regarding the dog's behaviour; and, respecting the bond held between the handler and the dog.

Can seizure alert dogs go into any public space?

Any assistance dog must pass a Public Access Test (PAT); a set of standards determined by Assistance Dogs International, in order to ensure that access to public spaces, events and services are guaranteed. The test reviews training level and acceptable standards of hygiene and behaviour. Following successful completion of the PAT the dog will be provided with an identity card, which must be provided if asked as proof that it is an assistance dog. Under the Health Act 1956 approved assistance dogs are guaranteed access to all public places in New Zealand. Information about the international standards can be found at Assistance Dogs International

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

– It can cost up to $40,000 to train a seizure alert dog and take two years (24 months) of training.

– There are non-profit and for-profit organisations that train seizure alert dogs, all of which have different pricing arrangements. It is best to speak with providers to learn more about training and payment requirements.

– There are different application processes for each dog training organisation, and some have waiting periods of up to 18 months.

Which organisations can train seizure alert dogs?

Seizure alert dogs require specific training by organisations that understand the handler, the handler's needs and goals, and any particular family requirements.

There are a number of organisations that train seizure alert and assistance dogs. If you are interested in pursuing this form of support it is recommended that you speak to the relevant organisations. These organisations include:

NZ Epilepsy Assist Dog Trust

Assistance Dogs NZ Trust

Blind Low Vision NZ

K9 Medical Detection NZ

Hearing Dogs NZ

Mobility Dogs

Perfect Partners Assistance Dogs Trust

K9 Search and Medical Detection

Kotuku Foundation Assistance Animals

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