

Dogs may be responding to psychological seizures, not epilepsy seizures

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Reports of dogs that can predict their owners' epilepsy seizures have been anecdotal and not objectively confirmed by doctors and researchers. Some people obtain service dogs trained specifically for people with seizures. In two new studies published in the January 23, 2007, issue of *Neurology*, the scientific journal of the American Academy of Neurology, researchers found that in some cases these dogs are responding to seizures caused not by epilepsy, but by psychological conditions.

"People with psychogenic seizures need psychiatric evaluation and appropriate treatment, not a specially trained dog for epileptic seizures," said study author Gregory L. Krauss, MD, of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, and a member of the American Academy of Neurology.

"This is important because the treatment is very different for a person with epilepsy and one with psychological seizures, which stem from emotional difficulties," said Krauss. "Epilepsy drugs are not effective for psychological seizures, and they often have side effects. And with proper treatment and counseling, psychological seizures can often be eliminated."

For the studies, researchers monitored seven people with seizure response dogs. Most were monitored with video electroencephalogram (EEG) tests to track seizures and electrical activity in the brain. Epileptic seizures are caused by abnormal electrical activity in the brain. For four of the people, unlike people with epilepsy, there was no abnormal electrical activity during seizures, and they were diagnosed with psychological seizures. Another person did not have the EEG test, but was also diagnosed with psychological seizures.

Krauss said it's possible that people with psychological seizures may seek out service animals for support. He noted that some people

with epileptic seizures may benefit from seizure response dogs.

"Seizure response dogs can help people during seizures and stay by them when they are unconscious and provide companionship that aids them in dealing with a chronic disorder," Krauss said. "People with nonepileptic seizures require psychiatric evaluation and behavior therapy. This study demonstrates the importance of establishing an accurate diagnosis of epilepsy before obtaining a seizure response dog."

Study author Michael J. Doherty, MD, of the Swedish Epilepsy Center in Seattle, Washington, and a member of the American Academy of Neurology, said the findings raise several questions that need to be further investigated. "If dogs can predict psychological seizures, could the seizures be a conditioned response to stereotypical dog behaviors? Does having a seizure alert dog lead people to have psychological seizures more or less often? Given the cost of training seizure alert dogs, should people requesting one be screened for psychological seizures?"

Source: American Academy of Neurology

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