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**ACTUAL ARTICLE WITH IDENTIFYING INFORMATION CHANGED**

## **Alert Dogs Guard Diabetics' Well-Being**

**Approx. 760 Words**

People living with insulin-dependent diabetes have a new ally in the battle to manage their disease: the hypoglycemia alert dog. This type of assistance dog has an innate ability to sense an onset of hypoglycemia in insulin-dependent diabetics.

Hypoglycemia, a severe drop in blood glucose level, can be life threatening if not addressed quickly; however, some diabetics develop hypoglycemia unawareness, eliminating their ability to recognize symptoms.

Not all dogs are able to sense hypoglycemia and the manner in which those that can sense it do so is not certain. What experts do know is that the ability can be reinforced, allowing dogs with this skill to serve as an "early warning system" for diabetics.

Denise Simpson, executive director of Canine Companions in Care in Huntsville, AL, suggested that certain dogs' knack for detecting severe glucose changes was first discovered by diabetics who noticed their pets exhibiting unusual behavior in close correlation to the onset of hypoglycemia symptoms. Those individuals, she offered, may have reported this correlation, and these reports caught the attention of people in the assistance dog industry who then investigated the claims.

Although the way in which these dogs sense a drop in glucose is not certain, the most common theory is that they sense a chemical signal. Simpson said the same theory holds true for dogs that sense impending seizures. "The dog's sense of smell is so acute that it's probably picking up on the pheromone changes that are happening within the body, often a long time before we see the clinical signs of some kind of a problem," Simpson said.

Dog breeds with especially keen senses of smell are best suited to be hypoglycemia alert dogs, and Labradors and Golden Retrievers are among the breeds most often used.

Bernice Sorentine is the founder of Champion Canines, Inc. in Roanoke, VA. Its trainers run the dogs through a series of temperament tests. They also use general scent discrimination techniques, confirming a dog's ability to find an object with a scent on it and then show enough interest in it to respond. Hypoglycemia alert dogs are trained to respond in the form of alerting. At Champion Canines, dogs are trained to alert on the diabetic first. "[T]hat can either be from licking or pawing or putting their feet up on [the person's] lap," said Sorentine, "and if there's no response from that individual then they're trained to go get help."

Simpson said her organization has only a couple dogs at the moment that are alerting. "We are working with an endocrinologist to see if this is an area that we want to pursue further to try to get a more consistent result in the alerts," said Simpson, "but at this point, our focus is on the secondary effects." Most of the dogs Canine Companions in Care places with diabetics are intended to meet that population's needs resulting from the secondary effects of diabetes, such as neuropathy, fatigue, and visual issues.

Champion Canines has already placed about six dogs for the purpose of alerting diabetics to hypoglycemic episodes. "The response has been very good," stated Sorentine. "It's pretty incredible."

Sorentine said it takes her trainers about two years to get a dog trained and they work with the dogs daily. She added that the dogs must be enthusiastic about doing the work; otherwise, they will not be reliable. "It's got to be fun for them," Sorentine said.

Training is also required for the person being matched with the dog. "We work with the people for anywhere from seven to fourteen days," said Sorentine, adding that she and her staff stay in contact with the person daily for the first six months of the placement. She said preparing hypoglycemia alert dogs to be placed with people is hard work but it is also rewarding. "It is just about the greatest thing I've ever done," said Sorentine.

The role hypoglycemia alert dogs have found in the lives of certain diabetics is vital. For that reason, Simpson said that the trend toward pairing insulin-dependent diabetics with hypoglycemia alert dogs could continue to grow. "It's a little hard to say what the need will be in the future," Simpson said, "but dogs do amazing things and really change lives, and I think as people find out the many benefits that can come from having a service dog, they will be more inclined to lean toward that kind of assistance."

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