They’re More Than Furry Companions – Meet a Diabetic Alert Dog

by DANIEL SHER

What Are Diabetic Alert Dogs?

They don’t just make wonderful pets; our furry four-pawed friends can also be trained as service dogs. There are many things that service dogs can help with, and diabetic alert dogs are just one option.

In this article, we discuss how a man’s best friend can assist with diabetes care, how to consider the pros and cons of diabetic alert dogs, as well as the process that is required to get one.

What Is a Diabetic Alert Dog?

Also known as “assistance dogs” or “detection dogs”, diabetic alert dogs help their owners to identify and treat dangerous blood-sugar fluctuations.

Dogs have a highly refined sense of smell, which helped them to sniff out food and prey before they were domesticated. As a result, when they are trained to pick-up on the scent of high or low blood sugar, they can often sniff out signs of unusual blood sugar before the human feels the symptoms.

How Do Diabetic Alert Dogs Work?

Diabetic alert dogs can be trained to perform a variety of helpful behaviors.

First, they are trained to sniff out a specific scent that the human body emits when blood sugars are starting to drop or climb. Upon smelling this, a dog will alert its owner by nudging with its nose or paws. Some diabetic alert dogs are also trained to retrieve their owner’s medication when needed, or even to assist in calling 911.

Who Are Diabetic Alert Dogs Appropriate For?

Diabetic alert dogs are recommended in particular for patients who develop what is known as hypoglycemia unawareness. Hypoglycemia, or low blood sugar, involves a dangerous drop in blood-glucose levels. If low blood sugar is not recognized and treated quickly it can lead to dangerous outcomes, including seizures, brain damage, and even a coma or death.

People who experience hypoglycemia unawareness lose the ability to detect symptoms that would otherwise suggest low blood sugar. In such instances, a diabetic alert dog can literally be a life saver, as they would indicate to the owner that their blood-glucose levels are taking a turn for the worst. This is especially pertinent at night, when a person with low blood sugar might otherwise not wake up in time.

Having said that, however, diabetic alert dogs are not only used for people with hypoglycemia unawareness. They can also detect when sugars are going high (hyperglycemia).

Other Benefits

Research suggests that having a diabetic alert dog can have benefits above and beyond providing a medical safety net. For example, a recent study found that having a diabetic alert dog can significantly reduce anxiety.

Furthermore, researchers found that having a diabetic dog makes it easier for people living with this condition to participate in sports, which has further spill-over benefits for diabetes management.

Finally, the study found that 75% of the people surveyed experienced a significantly improved quality of life as a result of having a diabetic service dog.

The Downside of Diabetic Alert Dogs

A diabetic alert dog is not just an important member of your treatment team, it is, naturally, also a pet. As with any other pet, owning one involves certain responsibilities. For example, one needs to ensure that their helper attends regular vet checkups, and that it gets fed and exercised regularly.

Larger dogs, which are frequently used as service animals, including golden retrievers and Labradors, need to be walked frequently. While this may be a challenging commitment, especially for those with busy schedules, frequent walks should not be perceived as a downside. Why? In addition to keeping your alert dog healthy, walking them frequently has the potential to improve your own diabetes management and mental health at the same time.

Beyond this, it is important to recognize that diabetic alert dogs can be expensive to train and maintain. For example, research estimates to purchase a diabetic alert dog a person with diabetes may need to spend as much as $2,000. Frequently, health insurance does not cover this expense.

The Process for Getting a Service Dog

There are several accredited organizations throughout the U.S. that specialize in training service dogs. While some organizations provide training for dogs that have already been raised by the owner, most organizations breed and train their own dogs, which allows them to ensure the pedigree and temperament of the dog are suitable.

The American Disability Association recognizes diabetic alert dogs as “service dogs”. This means that they need to receive a very high standard of training so that their owner can maintain complete control over their dog. Once a dog has been trained in this way, they will be allowed to visit public spaces (such as stores, cinemas and restaurants) where other pets may not necessarily be permitted.

In order to begin the process of getting paired with your diabetic alert dog, initiate a conversation with your doctor. This will allow you to determine whether a diabetic alert dog is the right option for you. For more information, you can also visit the Diabetes Alert Dog Alliance or Dogs 4 Diabetics.

No More Finger Pricks?

Some people expect that having a diabetic alert dog means that they will no longer need to test their sugars using finger-prick tests or continuous monitoring devices. This, unfortunately, is not the case.

While getting a diabetic alert dog may help by providing an additional set of eyes and ears to help you catch blood-sugar fluctuations early, this does not eliminate the need for self-management. This is especially pertinent in light of recent research, which has shown the diabetic alert dogs are not always as quick or accurate in detecting blood sugar changes, as compared to Continuous Glucose Monitors (CGMs).

Final Takeaway

Having a dog can mean more than just getting a pet. For people with diabetes, properly trained alert dogs can truly help improve their quality of life.

While there are certain downsides — such as high costs and concerns about reliability — getting a diabetic alert dog is an option well worth exploring with your doctor.