

My Dog Saved my Life!

Dogs with amazing scenting skills warn their humans of oncoming health crises.

Rose Boccio

Dogs' superior sniffing skills have long been used by law enforcement to detect explosives, narcotics, and more. Now, human health is benefiting from these skills. Dogs have been known to uncover cancer, alert people to oncoming epileptic seizures, warn diabetics of drops in blood sugar, and more.

Theories abound about how dogs can sense these things. Some say dogs can smell chemical changes in their humans. Studies are being done with hopes of replicating these abilities with technology, but – for now – dogs' noses rule.

Nancy Best was napping when her 8-month-old Golden Retriever Mia nudged her on the right breast. Best scolded her for disturbing her nap. Over the next 10 days, Mia tried several more times to sniff, lick, nudge and eventually pull at the right side of her owner's shirt.

"At first I thought she was smelling food on my clothes," Best says. "It was very annoying. I was trying to take a nap and she was very persistent."

As Best rested in a recliner one day, her daughter let Mia in from outside. The dog leapt into the chair and pushed her nose forcefully into a spot on Best's right breast. Instinctively, she put her hand to the same spot and found a lump. It was September 16, 1999.

Best went to her doctor, and had a biopsy that came back positive. She had Stage II breast cancer. She was 39 years old, the mother of three.

"It was a very aggressive cancer. I had a breast exam four months prior to that and was clear. I wouldn't have gone back for another exam for a year. By then, I would've been dead. I am convinced that she saved me life," Best says.

What followed was a year of treatment – lumpectomy, partial mastectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation.

Since beginning treatment, she has been given a clean bill of health and now has a new appreciation for Mia. "I love her. She's my constant companion. She seems to be able to read my mind."

Wanda West's tri-color Collie also has nudged her awake a few times. West, 71, has had diabetes for the past 20 years. Her 6-year-old dog and constant companion, Katy, jumped on her bed one morning two years ago and nuzzled her neck. When she wouldn't stop, West got up to let her out.

"But she just stood there looking at me. I didn't know what to think," she says. "Since I was up, I decided to take my sugar level. It was 39, which is very low."

West says she seldom sees her blood sugar drop so low, but if it's going to happen, it's more likely to happen first thing in the morning. A very low level could result in a diabetic coma, something she has thankfully never experienced.

Katy's warnings, which have included throwing a tennis ball into her owner's lap as she sat on the sofa, give West peace of mind. "I know she's watching out for me. She's momma's girl."

Sharon Hermansen has seen countless people gain peace of mind and a new lease on life – all because of their dogs' extraordinary senses. Hermansen trains seizure assist dogs through Canine Seizure Assist Society of North Carolina (<http://www.seizureassistdogs.org/csasncindex.htm>).

Dogs whose owners suffer from seizures alert them from minutes to hours before the seizure causes physical symptoms such as convulsions or loss of consciousness.

One mother with young children had such violent seizures she feared for their safety. Her dog alerted her well before the seizure began, so she could lie down, avoiding stairs and other dangerous places where she could fall and hurt herself. The dog was also trained to keep the children away from her during seizures.

Hermansen says one woman's dog took a knife right out of her hand at the kitchen counter before a seizure.

For 11 years, Hermansen has trained all kinds of dogs to respond to seizures – from Chihuahuas to Giant Schnauzers. Larger dogs learn to roll their owners on their sides during convulsive seizures because it's the safest position, she says. Smaller dogs learn to turn their owners' heads.

These dogs give people who suffer seizures a freedom to live that they would not be able to experience otherwise. One young woman was able to get a job, start dating, and is now engaged. One young man has gone away to college with his dog by his side, something that would have been unimaginable without his canine companion.

As Hermansen says, these dogs have given them courage to get out and live life.

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