

Guide Dog Handler Survey Reveals Health Concerns

Morris Animal Foundation survey on guide dog health could promote future research.

Posted: February 16, 2009, 5 a.m. EST

A recent survey conducted by the Morris Animal Foundation revealed that guide dog handlers see arthritis, allergies, and cancer as top health concerns and reasons for early dog retirement.

A guide dog handler is defined as an individual who is blind or visually impaired, partnered with a dog specially trained to safely guide.

The online survey of more than 1,000 respondents was the nonprofit organization's first attempt to collect information on the overall population of working guides over age 2. Although guide dog schools in the United States have considerable information on health issues that affect dogs younger than 2 years old, less information is available on issues that affect working guide dogs later in life.

"Guide dog teams have been referred to as the gold standard for a bond between a person and his or her dog," said Patricia Olson, DVM, Ph.D., president and chief executive officer of MAF. "Handlers provide love and care to their dogs; the dogs provide independence and loyalty to their handler. The overwhelming response to the survey made it abundantly clear just how much guide dog handlers appreciate and love their dogs."

Of the more than 1,000 respondents, 32 percent had been guide dog users for more than 20 years and 45 percent reported that they had four or more guide dogs. Most respondents indicated that they paid for their dog's veterinary care, 24 percent reported that veterinary care was supported by both handler and the guide dog school, and 5 percent indicated that the guide dog school provided all support for veterinary care.

Common health issues reported by respondents included the following: Orthopedic problems were reported as the top issue affecting former guide dogs (42 percent). Skin problems occurred in 30 percent of current guide dogs and 40 percent of former guide dogs. Ear-related health issues were reported in 21 percent of current guide dogs and 35 percent of former guide dogs. Cancer and/or tumors affected 28 percent of former guide dogs. Gastrointestinal disease was reported to have occurred in 14 percent of current guide dogs and 19 percent of former guide dogs. Cataracts were reported to have occurred in 15 percent of former guide dogs. Guide dog handlers ranked cancer as their top health concern followed by arthritis.

Respondents also reported on guide dogs' enthusiasm, personality, and response to stress. Twenty-nine percent of handlers gave their current guide dog a low rating for ability to deal with stress. Nearly one-third of current guide dogs and slightly more than 20 percent of former guide dogs were rated by handlers as being easily distracted. Food scrounging was reported as an issue for 28 percent of current guide dogs and 24 percent of former guide dogs.

The average age at time of retirement was highest for German Shepherd Dogs at 96 months, compared with 86 months for Labrador Retrievers and 88 months for Golden Retrievers.

The Morris Animal Foundation points out that although the survey was not intended to address risk factors for health, obtaining such information is a critical step toward developing future research priorities. Also, it may lead to immediate intervention strategies, such as further control of intestinal parasites to reduce the incidence of dogs suffering from gastrointestinal disease and thereby enhance work.

The survey was made possible, in part, by a matching grant from the Laura J. Niles Foundation, which encourages and supports efforts to improve the lives of both people and animals through research, training and adoption, especially where people and animals benefit simultaneously.