



To detect incoming migraines, a sighthound uses her nose.

# Heads Up

By Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz

*Holiday themes and animal prints with a few tutus dominate Amalfi's collection of more than 300 custom-designed dog sweaters. Half-fun, half-necessity, Amalfi's outfits help maintain the dog's body temperature, as lean and short-coated Italian Greyhounds require extra insulation in cold weather and protection from the sun in the summer.*

**W**hen students at the University of West Florida in Pensacola enter their applied behavior analysis class, they might scan the front for the best seats. Sitting up close means catching every word attorney-professor Mary Reagan delivers. But Amalfi, the teacher's pet, always beats them to the prime perch.

Parked on the podium, the 11-pound Italian Greyhound assumes her post as Reagan's migraine-alert dog. Decked out in a chevron-striped sweater under a red service dog vest, the dog sniffs chemical changes in her owner's breath. Picking up the scent of unstable respirations, 6-year-old Amalfi alerts the professor that a debilitating headache will strike.

## Heading Off Pain

A migraine-alert dog is trained to detect changes in his owner's mood, fatigue, and sensitivity to light and sound. He can also pick up on food cravings, stiff movement, trouble speaking, problems with sleeping, and other headache signs up to 48 hours before the owner experiences full symptoms. But knowing how to send the warning takes training.

PHOTOS: JERRY CHARVAT, COURTESY MARY REAGAN





*Before she trained Amalfi to catch early signs of a migraine, Reagan suffered from about 20 of these disabling headaches a month. Since her dog has been on the job, that number has dropped to less than seven. The skilled canine companion has given Reagan the freedom and confidence to maintain a demanding work and travel schedule.*

Amalfi's education began soon after Reagan, a behavior analyst, spotted a medical alert dog in an airport. Reagan was inspired to train one of her dogs to let her know when a migraine was coming—but which dog? With three German Shepherd Dogs and the IG, each breed offered pros and cons. While German Shepherds are known for their detection work, Amalfi won out.

"IGs are funny little clowns and not only beautiful but intelligent, so I thought she would be perfect," Reagan says. "Traveling with a small dog, rather than a large one, would be easier, too."

Reagan contacted Mary Cates McNeight, CCS, BGS, a certified medical alert service dog trainer and owner of Service Dog Academy ([servicedogacademy.com](http://servicedogacademy.com)). McNeight trains puppies and teaches owners how to prepare their dogs for service work. In nine online classes, McNeight advised her small group of students to begin the specialized training by socializing their dogs.

"For puppies, the best preparation is enrolling them in local puppy classes followed by early obedience and earning an AKC Canine Good Citizen certificate," says McNeight. "Following that, the specific medical alert training is lifelong."

To begin, Reagan took Amalfi everywhere with her. "Introducing her to different environments and situations helped prepare her for situations she would encounter later during our travels."

Reagan's subsequent assignments involved collecting swabs of her saliva during a migraine, soaking them in pieces of cotton, and placing them in an airtight container before freezing them.

"I used a defrosted sample to teach Amalfi how to identify my migraine," she recalls.

By telling Amalfi *scent* and then *paw*, the dog began associating the odor with the alert behavior. Daily 20-minute practice sessions repeating the exercises and testing the dog kept her alerting skills sharp.

"Teaching a dog to perform a life-giving task takes time, patience, a dog with the right temperament, and working with an experienced trainer," Reagan says. "Now I feel safer and can live my life."

### **Always by Her Side**

When Amalfi's delicate legs paw at Reagan's arm, she's giving a serious warning: "A migraine with aura is coming. To stop it from coming on, take your meds *now*."

The migraines accompany severe

sensory disturbances, or aura, compromising Reagan's eyesight and threatening to derail Reagan for days.

"The minute Amalfi alerts me, I know my condition is serious, and I'll reach for my medication," Reagan says. "She understands the connection between my breath and when I need medicine. If I don't take the meds within 15 or 20 minutes, she'll hit me with her paw again until I do."

Reagan would feel disoriented, tired, and nauseous without this preventive prescription.

"I also may vomit, lose vision in one eye for 30 minutes to an hour, and wind up in bed for two or three days," she says. "I've suffered from disabling migraines since I was 8, and this dog changed my life. I can't function without her."

Reagan suffered 20 migraines a month before she trained Amalfi as a scent-detection dog. After prepping Amalfi, the number decreased to five or seven.

According to Reagan, her small sighthound's accuracy is about 60 to 70 percent.



*On the Job: Wherever Reagan is, you'll see Amalfi nearby, always on alert—even when she is lounging on her bed—for the telltale signs that trouble is coming.*



## Buy or Train?

According to the American Migraine Foundation, migraine is the third most common disease in the world. It affects one in four households in the United States. A migraine-alert dog can improve the quality of your life and act as a loyal companion.

### Buying a Dog

If you're considering buying a trained alert dog, thoroughly check the trainer's techniques, references, qualifications, and terms of sale before agreeing to purchase a dog.

Training a service dog requires extensive preparation and differs significantly from training a pet dog for obedience.

Trained service dogs cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000, depending on the trainer. Unfortunately, most insurance policies do not cover the expense.

### Train Your Own

Training your dog to alert to migraines is challenging and happens only after a significant amount of time. With daily practice, reliable alerting can take up to two years to teach, so plan on committing the time.

One advantage of using your dog is that you can train it to the type of alert you choose, such as pawing, licking, barking, or sitting. Another plus comes from saving the expense.

If you already have a dog you're bonded to, you both know the other's behaviors and won't have to start from scratch.

"She might miss an alert if she's in the house and I'm outside or if I have a migraine in my sleep, although sometimes she will warn me at night," Reagan says.

These odds guarantee Amalfi full-time



*Frequent Flyers:  
Reagan and Amalfi  
travel by air more  
than a dozen times a  
year, sometimes for  
work and often for  
vacation.*

employment as her owner's silent alarm system. Thanks to her dog, Reagan's migraines have not prevented her from living a fulfilling life and maintaining her career and travel schedule.

"My dog accompanies me to work, my hair salon, shopping, doctor's visits, and across the country," she says.

The clever IG doesn't need to stay at her owner's side to help ward off a bad migraine.

"One day at my office ... I was working at my desk and so hyperfocused on a project that I ignored Amalfi pawing at me," Reagan recalls. "After a few minutes, she ran down the hall to my friend and colleague, Courtney Peppers. When Amalfi began pawing at her arm, Courtney knew what it meant and came checking on me."

At another time, Reagan introduced a speaker at the podium and asked a friend in the front row to hold Amalfi. But true to the breed's temperament, the toy charmer refused to be ignored.

"Amalfi was 4 feet in front of me, and I could hear her whining," Reagan says. "Since my dog never whines, I suspected a headache coming. She kept trying to

alert me, and my friend struggled to hold onto her. When a guest uses the podium now, Amalfi lies on a blanket beside me."

As executive director for the Standard Celeration Society, a special interest group of Applied Behavior Analysis International, and the assistant director of student success for the Center of Behavior Analysis, Reagan and Amalfi are always on the go.

Seven or eight times a year, this executive presents a conference on behavior analysis in the United States, Mexico, and Ireland. She and Amalfi also fly to four or five vacation spots.

"I never thought I could apply my law degree to this job," says Reagan, who teaches the course Autism and the Law. "Thanks to Amalfi, my career is so rewarding. If I can help one person with autism or a single student to become a behavior analyst, all the travel is worth it." **FD**

*Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz is the author of more than a dozen books about dogs. She doesn't need to train her Pembroke Welsh Corgi to let her know when to take a break from work. Midge barks on the hour.*

PHOTO COURTESY MARY REAGAN